

Routledge Studies in New Media and Cyberculture

GHOSTS IN THE DATING APP MACHINE

VIRALITY, AI, DATA COLONIALISM

Gregory Narr





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“There is no more important space of freedom than love, and nowhere today do extractivism’s hidden forces mine deeper than on dating apps. Greg Narr in this theoretically rich and sharply critical study of contemporary dating platforms adds an essential dimension to our understanding of data colonialism. Highly recommended.”

—**Nick Couldry**, *Professor of Media, Communications and Social Theory, London School of Economics and Political Science, UK*

“Ghosts in the dating app machine is an indispensable read for the way it addresses the fundamental shift in the social and the transformation of the subject of desire brought with the ongoing development of AI. It will entice its readers with its provocative call for change and the evocative approach it develops to do so.”

—**Patricia Ticineto Clough**, *Professor of Sociology and Women’s Studies, Queens College, CUNY, USA*ⁱⁱ

Ghosts in the Dating App Machine

Ghosts in the Dating App Machine offers a critical examination of the shift to dating apps to illustrate key features of a broader shift to a mode of “data” colonialism based on datafication and AI orchestration.

This book analyses 48 in-depth and mediated interviews, forums, blogs, and official statements made by dating apps. It situates this transition within the broader culture of data colonialism through close readings of science fiction, suggesting the world has become like *Us*, where doppelgangers constituted from reprehensible proclivities have emerged as digital profiles reflected back to users through the horrific play of social media mirrors to govern their encounters against their wishes. These mirrors allow media companies to conduct surreptitious experiments on users’ dispossessed desires, devise digital doppelgangers from those they disavow, and compel behaviors that are lucrative precisely because they are misaligned with humane values. Yet this horrific play of mirrors is not inevitable. By attending to the ghosts of colonialism unleashed by media companies through the approach developed in this book, it is still possible to galvanize the collective will to combat data colonialism and strive to create a world where love disentangled from colonial modes of desire is possible.

This study will interest scholars attempting to understand the rapidly evolving ecology of dating apps within the areas of digital media, media sociology, cultural studies, anthropology, and media and communication studies.

Gregory Narr has researched and taught at CUNY, USA, and Harvard University, USA, including classes on online dating and social media.

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Acknowledgments

A book is the product of a collective ghost. Ideas develop along with others as they become instantiated within the text. I thus attempted to do justice to the concerns of these others that helped bring this book into being. First and foremost are my volunteer respondents. This book would have been impossible without their willingness to open up to me about their dating lives. Each one of them placed their trust in me, a relative stranger, to use their experiences as a springboard for attempting to improve the realm of online dating. My students also provided me with feedback as I developed this book, sometimes as the first readers of chapters as they developed. Their questions and interest kept the process fresh and fun.

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- The article "The coloniality of desire: revealing the desire to be seen and blind spots leveraged by data colonialism as AI manipulates the unconscious for profitable extraction on dating apps" by Gregory Narr was originally published in *Fronteras – estudos midiáticos*, 24(3):72–84 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.4013/fem.2022.242.07>. I revised parts of this article for [Chapter 3](#): The ghost of coloniality.
- The article "Imagining algorithms to believe in: Comparing OkCupid and Tinder users' perceptions of algorithms to uncover alternatives to algorithmic exploitation on dating apps" by Gregory Narr was originally published in *International Journal of Communications* volume 16: pg. 20 (2022). I revised parts of this article for [Chapter 5](#): OkCupid's algorithmic imagination
- The article "The uncanny swipe drive: The Return of a Racist Mode of Algorithmic Thought on Dating Apps" by Gregory Narr was originally published in *Studies in Gender & Sexuality* volume 22:3 (2021) pg: 219–236 <https://doi.org/10.1080/15240657.2021.1961498>. It has been reprinted by permission of the publisher Taylor & Francis Ltd, <http://www.tandfonline.com>. I revised parts of this article for [Chapter 8](#): The uncanny swipe drive.
- The article "Bored ghosts in the dating app assemblage: How dating app algorithms couple ghosting behaviors with a mood of boredom" by Gregory Narr and Anh Luong was originally published in *The Communication Review* volume 26:1 (2023) pg: 1–23 <https://doi.org/10.1080/10714421.2022.2129949>. It has been reprinted by permission of the publisher Taylor & Francis Ltd, <http://www.tandfonline.com>. I revised parts of this article for [Chapter 9](#): Bored ghosts and anxious text games.

1 Introduction

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Ghosts are summoned below to help create a world conducive to authentic love. This will not be easy. As the seminal decolonial scholar Frantz Fanon noted 70 years ago, truly authentic love will not be possible unless the influence of colonialism is eradicated from how we desire (2008).

Fanon called on us to create a world conducive to authentic love because he felt we all have core humane values. But these values had been so inverted by colonial processes that resources had been divvied up among a handful of colonizing powers at the expense of most of the inhabitants of the globe. He thus called on us all, those privileged within such a world as much as those disadvantaged by it, to set it right side up (1963).

Fanon felt decolonizing desire was central to the task of decolonization. And as he called on us to decolonize desire, he detailed how it had been shaped by dominant social systems that Western European colonizers had created, beginning in the 15th century (2008). Many of these social systems, often referred to as coloniality today, remain in place despite the broad geopolitical decolonization that occurred by the turn of the 21st century (Quijano, 2000; Wynter, 2003). In fact, coloniality is now being advanced by a new mode of colonialism that has become increasingly dominant over the last two decades, what Couldry and Mejias call “data colonialism” (2019). This new mode of colonialism perpetuates axes of oppression central to older ones. But it does so through a different means of dispossession and method of extraction: a “data grab” mined by AI-powered media companies reconfiguring increasing domains of everyday life (Mejias & Couldry, 2024).

The case study of dating apps below unpacks how this data colonialism works by detailing how it is colonizing desire. It does this by presenting findings from interviews I conducted with dating app users, analyses of forums and blogs where users discuss these apps, and official statements made by these apps about their algorithms (see appendix for methods). It also extrapolates out from these findings to processes detailed by other scholars about social media in general and back through a long history of colonialism. In addition, it provides four close readings of science fiction movies and TV – of *Westworld*,

Us, Ex Machina, and “*Hang 2the Dj*” (Garland, 2015; Nolan & Joy, 2016; Patten, 2017; Peele, 2019) – to help unpack the broader culture of data colonialism.

By osculating between broader and narrower levels of analysis in this way, I argue that dating apps exemplify how media companies now possess us with ghosts of coloniality constituted from our own dispossessed desires. Yet as dire as this is, I also suggest that by honing our capacity to grasp these ghosts through the conceptual and methodological tools developed in this book, we can begin to redress the past they recall.

In this introduction, I flesh out how we are becoming with these ghosts on three levels of analysis. I start out by detailing ghosts of data colonialism, move on to ghosts of AI, and then reveal ghosts of dating apps. After delineating these ghosts, I then suggest that combating data colonialism will require a few shifts in focus, from rooting out interpersonal violence to eradicating epistemic violence, from valorizing individualism to valuing reciprocally beneficial relations, and from ignoring ghosts to leveraging hopeful ones in order to dispel the nefarious ones dominating social processes today. To conclude this chapter, I then provide a brief outline of the rest of the book.

Ghosts of data colonialism

Ghosts of data colonialism emerge out of the dominant way resources are amassed today: a mode of accumulation through data dispossession recalling processes that have long been central to colonization. These processes include relentless penetration into new domains, incessant extraction of resources, and callous exploitation of people. Data colonialism also perpetuates hegemonic ideologies that colonizers have advanced for centuries. Hegemonic ideologies are interconnected arrays of commonplace ideas, assumptions, and beliefs that have a dominant and dominating influence on the governance of society and are often believed even by those whose interests they undermine (Fisher, 2022a; Herman & Chomsky, 2010). Hegemonic ideologies within data colonialism resonate with a long history of colonial ideologies developed by the ruling classes of Western European colonizers and their settler colonies, like the United States. These include notions of divine right stemming from the 15th century, Enlightenment reason from the 17th, and capitalist rationality from the 19th (Wynter, 2003).

Hegemonic ideologies central to past modes of colonialism have been advanced by religious leaders, philosophers, and human scientists to justify the inhuman treatment of most of the inhabitants

of the world for over half a millennium (Mbembe, 2019). Their proponents have argued that this treatment was justified by claiming, in various and evolving ways, that only rich, White, European men are fully human. The hegemonic ideology within data colonialism, advanced by media companies and the politicians they elect, is different. But it continues to privilege wealth, Whiteness, and masculinity (Ricaurte, 2022). The gist of this ideology is that AI is poised to add value to all domains of everyday life as it rapidly becomes more intelligent than everyone.³

From ideology to cynical engagement

While it remains important to critique ideological conceits, a key claim of this book is that data colonialism has rendered ideological critique less effective. This is because the locus of power within data colonialism has shifted away from ideology and toward systemic forces orchestrated by computational machines media companies control as they summarily shape more and more of our connections. A key result of this control at the hands of media companies is that users often engage social media cynically, as a frustrating yet necessary evil, done more out of addiction or a dearth of alternatives than any real hope of attaining their goal (Dencik & Cable, 2017; Kendall, 2018; Paasonen, 2021; Zizek, 2009). This cynicism acts as a kind of coping mechanism, allowing users to mentally detach from the seeming inevitability of algorithmic exploitation advanced by data colonial processes (Draper & Turow, 2019; Vallor, 2024; Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021).

This widespread cynicism has become so integral to the functioning of data colonialism that I argue our go-to critical tools are in need of an update. These tools – deconstructing false consciousness (Marx, 1992), interrogating double consciousness (Fanon, 2008), revealing market mentalities (Foucault, 2010), cognitive mapping (Jameson, 1990), consciousness raising, etc. – all presume knowledge of exploitation goes hand in hand with its mitigation. But users provide the cynical engagement data colonialism thrives on precisely because they think exploitation is inevitable. Continuing to merely document this exploitation is thus more likely to feed into than disrupt data colonialism.

Feeling uncanny ghosts

Along with documenting the exploitation advanced by data colonialism, I thus argue we must also devise ways to evoke abhorrence at its barbarism. To this end, I develop tools able to hone our capacity to viscerally grasp the ghosts of coloniality we are being

coupled with via the Freudian uncanny.

To understand why the Freudian uncanny is so useful for critiquing data colonialism, one must first note Freud's unconventional view of it. He argued it does not stem from the mere close juxtaposition of the familiar with the strange, as is commonly assumed, but that it stems from collectively repressed modes of thought as they threaten to return to consciousness (2003).

This imminent return of the repressed induces fear because it troubles the common stories we like to tell about ourselves as having moved beyond outdated ways of thinking that are now seen as abhorrent. These ways of thinking frequently return to us because they were never adequately redressed. Instead, they were repressed, lodged within the unconscious of individuals in a way that is common to all. As such, these ways of thinking are largely imperceptible to us individually. Yet they continue to be very much alive. By inducing fear, then, the Freudian uncanny encourages us to turn away from the unconscious from whence this return of the repressed threatens to emerge.

With a bit of sociological gloss, this Freudian uncanny can be seen as providing an evocative force field preserving the familiar stories powerful forces within society like to tell about its progressiveness. These common stories, for their part, act as screen memories, or fantasies, encouraging people to ignore a past so abhorrent that recalling it would require some form of redress. By compelling people to turn away from this past, then, the uncanny encourages them to remain ignorant of historical injustice powerful forces would prefer to keep hidden.

Instead of turning away from the uncanny in this book, I thus follow its visceral pull back to the abhorrent past it stems from. In so doing, I expose past modes of thinking we pride ourselves on having left behind, but that remain living within.

Following the uncanny through sci-fi

I work my way back to these uncanny ways of thinking, in part, through close readings of science fiction. I suggest, for instance, that *Ex Machina's* fembot disrupting the heteropatriarchal status quo, *Westworld's* android revolt against data colonizers, and "Hang the DJ's" depiction of dating apps simulating love, all in the near future, distract us from the oppression data colonialism currently amplifies (Garland, 2015; Nolan & Joy, 2016; Patten, 2017). I also provide an allegorical reading of *Us* (Peele, 2019). In it, I suggest its revolt of tethered doppelganger made from reprehensible proclivities of their originals and emerging from a hall of mirrors to rule the world is an

apt figure for the digital profiles media companies now create of us to govern our encounters.

Situating my findings within these readings allows me to flesh out uncanny ghosts rooted in a long history of coloniality now being unleashed by data colonialism. These ghosts will be hardest to grasp by those they privilege most. This is a problem. As Fanon noted 70 years ago, dismantling colonialism will require those privileged by it to “wake up, put on their thinking caps and stop playing the irresponsible game of sleeping beauty” (1963, p. 62).

Those oppressed by these ghosts, on the other hand, are likely to grasp their pull intuitively. Indeed, those speaking truth to power from the margins, from Toni Morrison to Jordan Peele, have long understood that creating a better world requires summoning ghosts (2004). And the ghosts invoked by them have not always emerged from trauma. Far from it. They have populated origin stories, served as portals to the wisdom of ancestors, and been channeled to advance justice.

Because invoking ghosts has for so long been demonized by colonizers to legitimate their own rapacity, I propose leveraging these suppressed modes of invoking the past is a good place to begin imagining how to decolonize desire today. In so doing, I suggest we might yet be able to feel, rather than merely see, know, understand, and then cynically ignore, the unconscionable hold data colonialism now has on us.⁵

Throwing a wrench into virality machines

As I expose these uncanny ghosts emerging from data colonialism, I find it important to detail the role touchscreen phones have played in their emergence. I argue these phones function as virality machines because of the penetrating, disruptive, and rapidly spreading data logic they facilitate. To make this point, I note how their material affordances – touch interfaces, immediate haptic feedback, sensors for ubiquitous datafication, etc. – have allowed media companies to quickly spread novel behaviors, such as rapid swipes and incessant texts, as novel means of connection. I then show how data extracted from these behaviors is mined by AI to allocate embodied feedback in ways that easily update users’ body parts with new drives to serve data colonialism.

Grasping these uncanny ghosts animating virality machines should help us feel the pull of data colonialism on our bodies. I thus argue this approach can be used as a tool to jolt us out of the cynical mode of engagement data colonialism requires to function. In other words, I propose we use it as a proverbial wrench to be thrown into the

machines now coupling our body parts – swiping thumbs, tapping fingers, spreading sex organs, beating hearts – with ghosts of a past we consciously abhor, yet nevertheless continue to serve.

Ghosts of AI

To expose ghosts of data colonialism in this book, I focus on the role AI has played in their emergence. Here, I unpack that role in broad strokes by detailing how AI is instantiating the ghost in the machine trope in three interconnected ways: (1) actualizing mind-body dualism; (2) compelling adherence to the false allure of general AI; and (3) advancing the singularity through automated ignorance.

Actualizing mind-body dualism

AI is instantiating the ghost in the machine trope by actualizing mind-body dualism. The ghost in the machine trope was first invoked by Ryle in 1948 in his book-long critique of mind-body dualism (2009). In this critique, he argued the ghost in the machine is an apt metaphor for the absurd yet common view among philosophers that our minds are immaterial ghosts independent from our mechanical bodies. This trope, he added, is tracable to Descartes's well-known dictum privileging the mind over the body – “I think, therefore I am” – generally seen as signaling the beginning of the Enlightenment.

Ryle explained why this mind-body dualism is illogical. But many scholars have noted that it resonates with three worldviews that have naturalize colonialism for 550 years (Du Bois & Marable, 2015; Fanon, 2008; Mbembe, 2019; Nandy, 1989; Quijano, 2000; Wynter, 2003): first, Christians supposedly endowed with sacred souls were depicted as better than everyone else presumed to be governed by demonic bodily urges; second, Western Europeans supposedly endowed with reason were depicted as better than all others presumed to be governed by animalistic impulses; and third, Westerners supposedly endowed with industriousness were depicted as better than everyone else presumed to be governed by immediate bodily pleasures.

Some form of mind/body duality has thus proved to be a very powerful absurdity indeed for over half a millennium. Far from being limited to the cerebral realm of philosophers pondering the relation between human minds and bodies, it has been central to regimes of thought bent on justifying colonialism for centuries. Building out from these dualities, networks of tropes, stereotypes, and assumptions have formed. Three are worth foregrounding here given their importance in subsequent chapters of this book: (1) that women are governed by irrational emotions rather than reason; (2) sexual practices deviating from heteronormativity are debased; and (3) a hierarchy of humans

exists with respect to skin color.

Because these interlinked assumptions have been taken for granted for so long, they have jelled into a stable ideological formation that Fanon described as a kind of cultural unconscious (2008). He described this cultural unconscious as getting passed down through common tropes and stereotypes so ubiquitous in popular culture they are rarely reflected upon consciously, yet nevertheless greatly affect how people think and behave. And he added that because this cultural unconscious had become suffused with coloniality after 500 years of cultural imperialism, we must find ways to align it with humane values if we wish to decolonize desire.

This process of realigning the cultural unconscious with humane values is harder than it may at first appear. In fact, many people today already explicitly reject the sexist, heteronormative, and racist stereotypes I mentioned above. This leads them to assume they are not influenced by them. But because these stereotypes have been entangled with a web of myriad other stereotypes for so long, they continue to influence the thoughts and behaviors of many despite their conscious disavowal. This is especially true when these behaviors are habitually performed in an absentminded way (Dovidio et al., 2016), as they are obviously more susceptible to the influence of the unconscious than actions taken after conscious deliberation (Wilderson III, 2020).

This heightened influence of the cultural unconscious on habitually performed behaviors is why AI-powered social media is such an ominous development. These media are known to cultivate habitual behaviors that are performed absentmindedly, making their networks highly susceptible to amplifying desires informed by the cultural unconscious. Moreover, AI also makes the coloniality it perpetuates harder to perceive and resist than it is within the cultural unconscious. This is because the cultural unconscious emerges from cultural artifacts consciously made for conscious consumption – movies, aphorisms, books, etc. But AI-powered apps orchestrate behaviors through embodied, habitual feedback largely designed to circumvent conscious awareness entirely (Clough, 2018).

Because AI shapes behaviors in ways that are further removed from conscious awareness than the cultural unconscious, I argue a new mode of unconscious thought has emerged – the distributed unconscious. As this distributed unconscious selects for and incentivizes behaviors, I argue it does far more than embed mind-body dualism within inscrutable jumbles of code. It also uploads mind-body dualism within the assemblages it automates. It does this by compelling users' bodies to either move in ways misaligned with their conscious wishes or risk becoming socially isolated in the go-to spaces

most people now turn to for intimacy. By detailing this misalignment of users' behaviors with their conscious wishes, I reveal a distributed unconscious that is threatening to lock us into a mode of coloniality that is even harder to perceive, and thus in some ways harder to combat, than it was during previous modes of colonization.

Updating for a world enamored by the false allure of general AI

The ghost in the machine trope is also instantiating through the false allure of general AI. General AI is a mode of AI, presumed by many to be imminent, that will be able to learn things in vastly different domains of inquiry, like humans. While general AI has been elusive, some believe machines have come much closer to attaining it with the development of generative AI.

The ability of generative AI to churn out creative feats in an instant rivalling those made by humans that have spent their entire lives honing their craft has already reduced the need for many creative jobs. This has been achieved by media companies stealing the lifework of millions of artists and authors (Chomsky et al., 2023). As dire as this theft of human creativity is, it is only a small part of the colonization of everyday life underway as these companies grab as much data as possible and experiment using AI to mine it for profits (Mejias & Couldry, 2024).

These experiments are used to inform algorithmic incentives that tend to exacerbate social inequity by default (Vallor, 2024). Yet the companies conducting these experiments remain free to do so because there are few regulations in place to stop them (Fisher, 2022b; Fuller & Goffey, 2012; Hansen, 2015). As these companies mine and manipulate social life through these algorithms, they compel users to behave in ways they valorize or risk becoming underexposed, if not invisible, within the networks they orchestrate. As such they amplify the influence of those who update their behaviors for today's world beholden to the false allure of general AI.

Users make these updates by upgrading to the latest trending app. While these upgrades rarely lead to much improvement, they habituate users to habitual change, which readies their bodies to be coupled with whatever AI experiments media companies devise.

Actualizing the singularity through automated ignorance

The ghost in the machine trope is also being instantiating via the automated ignorance of AI, which is accelerating the advent of the

singularity. The singularity refers to a hypothetical moment in the near future when techno-futurists predict machines will develop superintelligence, or intelligence that surpasses human intelligence (Bostrom, 2014; Kurzweil, 2014). I explore this anticipated future through close readings of science fiction.⁸

In these readings, I argue these depictions of the singularity encourage us to remain ignorant of the colonality AI is currently amplifying. For example, I note that *Ex Machina* invokes fear grounded in the heteronormative trope of a diabolical female robot subverting heteropatriarchal control that is rooted in Enlightenment assumptions that men naturally hold a monopoly on reason. I also detail how *Westworld*'s slave-cum-android revolt against data colonizers in the future provides psychic relief for the guilty conscience of a Western world that likes to see itself as progressive, yet remains deeply invested in colonality.

The ignorance advanced by these popular depictions of the singularity is part of the cultural unconscious of data colonialism. And it is troubling. But ignorance automated by the distributed unconscious is even worse because it couples with processes further removed from conscious awareness.

Given this difficulty of perceiving the distributed unconscious, it will take the entirety of this book to begin to flesh out. But a preliminary schematic of how it works can be outlined from a recent online dating patent. This patent is entitled, "Computer systems and processes configured to identify behavioral, action, activity, and/or emotional states of a person and to respond to the identity of the states" (DiRienzo, 2024). It describes an AI system conducting surreptitious experiments on users to discern their unconscious proclivities by mining data from myriad platforms and apps. This system then amalgamates these unconscious proclivities into so-called "true" user profiles, which it uses to send users "optimized" date recommendations.

As a prototypical stake on our future desires, this patent reads less like an invention than the wet dream of data colonialism: an ideological fantasy proposing to circumvent consciousness as the last remaining roadblock to finally giving us what we truly want before we even know we want it. This fantasy encourages us to sleep soundly as our intimate lives are controlled by media companies with ever-increasing granularity.

As this wet dream of data colonialism gets instantiated within dating apps and social media more broadly (aimm, 2019; Silberling, 2023; "Snack," 2021), our bodies become possessed by our own dispossessed desires. The singularity is indeed near, then, but less because machines have become so very intelligent than because media

companies now arrogate intelligence itself to machines they govern while the distributed unconscious takes control.

In sum, then, these processes endemic to data colonialism – automating mind-body dualism, updating for a world beholden to the false allure of general AI, and accelerating the advent of the singularity via AI’s automation of ignorance – are instantiating the ghost in the machine trope as a dominant model of action now governing our everyday lives. And they do this in a way that has yet to be imagined by philosophers, techno-futurists, or science fiction. Rather than surpassing the vaunted mind of the Enlightenment en route to a prosperous transhuman age or our prompt demise, they actualize the ghost in the machine trope in a way that is far more familiar, yet eminently more strange: by working us into ghosts of coloniality haunting ourselves.⁹

Ghosts of dating apps

To flesh out these ghosts of data colonialism and AI more concretely, I show how they emerge on dating apps from the recent insertion of AI into them. I do this, in part, by revealing key insights from my respondents. Take Sara. She looked bored flicking her thumb across her phone as I spotted her at the quiet bar we had previously agreed to meet at for our interview. As I sat down, she excitedly angled her phone to show me the dating app she was using. She then showed me three more she had on her phone. As she was about to open her fifth, I asked if she had been successful on any of them. Her voice then took on a cynical tone as she turned to a familiar topic:

Most of the time it doesn’t go anywhere. It doesn’t get to that point because the odds are so low.

They ghost. I get ghosted. A lot of ghosting. You know what that is? Ghosting? **Yeah, they start talking, and then they don’t respond when you text them [My words during interviews are in bold throughout this book]**. Text them, emails, whatever. It’s just too busy. Falls off.

Doesn’t happen. There’s too many options. And I am not chasing. I’ll give it a couple of times. But if you are not, I’m not. I’m done. I’m not chasing.

Like Sara, many of my respondents were frustrated with the number

of insubstantial encounters they had made on dating apps. They recalled matches slipping through their grasp, even after multiple meetings in the flesh. Over time, they had become resigned to going through the motions, sifting through profiles, texting, and going on dates as if compelled by something outside of themselves, their bodies continuing to seek the rush they got from dating apps long after they had stopped believing in their efficacy.

This disconnect between behavior and belief displayed by my respondents exemplifies the cynical mode of engagement dating apps now rely on for profits. Far from the enticing sex party these apps are often presumed to be, they described a steady stream of impersonal texts, ghosting, and flaking out on dates at the last minute. From these thoughtless encounters, they learned to expect inconsiderate treatment from their matches and to reciprocate in kind. Over time, many began to find it hard to see the humanity in their matches, as well as in themselves. This led them to cynically engage dating apps as a way to mentally detach from the thoughtless environments they cultivate, in turn rendering them susceptible to being coupled with three key ghosts of coloniality governing dating apps.

Dating app ghosts

The dating app ghosts I reveal in this book belie the ideological conceit that AI is beneficial for all. In fact, they indicate that the rapid uptake of AI within the online dating industry has led to worse outcomes for most online daters. I illustrate this by comparing how my respondents behaved on OkCupid's website with how they behaved on the dating apps of Tinder and Bumble that many of them had recently adopted. Briefly, they acted like rational entrepreneurs of intimacy on OkCupid.com, a website that did not use AI. But on AI-powered dating apps, they began absentmindedly swiping and sending banal, impersonal texts to most of their matches.

I argue this shift to thoughtless and counterproductive behavior on dating apps was induced, in part, by the algorithmic incentives these apps utilize. These algorithms seemed to cultivate interactive environments that were largely misaligned with the interests of most of my respondents. Some of them detected this misalignment. But they were unsure precisely why this was the case. This book is thus meant to paint a more complete picture of how these algorithms work. While I cannot reveal the precise calibration of these algorithms given that they are proprietary, I render the black boxes presented to users a bit less opaque by revealing the sexist, racist, and heteronormative ghosts of coloniality animating them.

The sexist ghost animating dating apps emerges, in part, from the

swipe protocol. This protocol shows profiles stacked like a deck of cards that users swipe right on to “like” or left on to “dislike.”

The women in my sample said this protocol was misaligned with how they experienced attraction, as they felt it was based primarily on looks rather than aspects of personality or values they were more interested in. They also felt compelled to sexualize their profiles and depict themselves as less serious about dating than they were because of the feedback they received, in terms of recommendations, matches, and messages.

Dating app algorithms also incentivize sending quick texts to generate lots of engagement. This leads many users to send boring, impersonal texts because they are easier to send quickly to many users than personalized ones. The women in my sample found these boring texts particularly annoying because they wanted to have a few interesting exchanges with their matches to ensure they at least had some potential to develop into something substantial before meeting them.

Dating app algorithms thus cultivate a mode of expression that is at odds with the desires of the women in my sample. Many scholars have detailed sexist dynamics of social media and dating apps (Dean, 2009, 2010, 2014; Fisher, 2018; Kendall, 2018, 2019; Paasonen, 2021; Pettman, 2016). But by tracing this sexism back through a long history of colonialism in this book (Butler, 1993; Nandy, 1989; Rich, 2021), I render it graspable as an uncanny ghost haunting dating apps.

My respondents were frustrated with the number of boring encounters they made on dating apps. But they also saw them as a harmless bit of distraction. This is partly due to their gamified designs, which makes them look and feel like games of chance. Their algorithms can also be addictive because they send users enticing profiles and matches whenever their interest begins to wane.

This addictiveness led my respondents to become hooked on the dopamine rush they got from using dating apps. This led them to rapidly swipe for superficial jolts of recognition according to gut reactions, often after little more than a quick glance at the first profile photo. From these swipes, dating apps then datafy desire based on stereotypes, including racist ones. This data is then mined by the AI these apps use in order to rank users and allocate dating opportunities, with those ranked higher given quicker and better opportunities to connect. This makes it hard for POC in particular to find quality dates in the go-to spaces single people now turn to for sexual intimacy.

Much has been written about the racism advanced by algorithmic media and online dating (Beller, 2021; Noble, 2018; O’Neil, 2016). But by tracing the racist AI used by dating apps back through a long

history of colonialism (Beckert & Rockman, 2016; Beller, 2021), I render it graspable as another uncanny ghost governing dating apps.

I also reveal a heteronormative ghost emerging from dating apps. I do this by first detailing key differences in the way my sexual minority and straight respondents dated. Briefly, the former put lots of thought into their profiles, swipes, and messages. But the latter tended to swipe quickly according to physical attraction and to send the same banal openers to everyone.

Because dating app business models are predicated on amassing lots of fungible connections to monetize, I argue they are likely to select for the scalable mode of interactivity displayed by my straight respondents over and against the less scalable approach of my sexual minority respondents. By detailing this synergy between dating app algorithms and the heteronormative desire central to coloniality (Foucault, 1978; Keeling, 2019; Puar, 2018), I expose a third uncanny ghost haunting the dating app machine.

Black boxed corporate power

As dating apps devise AI experiments to influence how sexual intimacy unfolds, they devise algorithmic incentive structures that fly in the face of longstanding ideals of sexual freedom in the West (Giddens, 1993; Illouz, 2019). Yet online dating companies claim the AI they now use to automate intimate encounters enhances rather than diminishes that freedom. For instance, Matchgroup, which is a corporation that owns most of the most popular dating platforms, says the AI it uses to make recommendations, craft messages, and construct profiles leads to more authentic and genuine connections than could be made without using AI (Silberling, 2023). Meanwhile, it guards its dominant position within the industry by buying up startups or suing them out of existence, as it has with the Muslim dating app Muzmatch (Khan, 2022). This illustrates the bald duplicity of doublespeak today. As media companies ignore the desires of much of the world, they often claim to be optimizing some aspect of everyday life for everyone.

Some users certainly buy into this doublespeak. But the experiences of my respondents showed that few of them were actually duped by this marketing dross. In fact, they largely understood the transition to AI-powered dating apps had made it harder for them to find the substantial connections they sought. Yet because Matchgroup holds a near monopoly on dates, it matters little whether they believe its marketing about AI or not. Given the dearth of alternatives they have to using its many apps, most will continue to use them, compelled by a world beholden to the false allure of general AI, even while

remaining highly skeptical of its presumed imminence.¹²

Shifts in focus needed to combat data colonialism

Given the power online dating companies now have to shape desire however they see fit, I propose three things that could help to address their problematic outcomes. First, focus on epistemic rather than interpersonal violence. Second, devise relational rather than individualistic solutions. And third, invoke hopeful ghosts to dispel the nefarious ones now governing daters' encounters.

From interpersonal to epistemic violence

By showing how dating apps couple their users with ghosts of coloniality in this book, I aim to reveal more than a few bugs that ought to be fixed. I aim instead to illuminate the danger we are now in of getting locked into a world where AI-powered apps amplify coloniality while making it harder to perceive and resist. This difficulty stems, in large part, from the fact that these apps advance coloniality through epistemic violence.

Epistemic violence occurs when one way of coming to know the world and evaluate one's place within it is callously supplanted by another. A colonial worldview based on individualism and ever-more elaborate rationales for exploiting the land and others, for instance, callously supplanted worldviews set forth by Indigenous Peoples based on maintaining connections with the land and forging reciprocally beneficial relations with others (Escobar, 2018; Mejias & Couldry, 2024).

Epistemic violence usually occurs and is naturalized through social institutions that govern broad social systems – such as religious beliefs, scientific processes, or economics. The longevity and spatial expansiveness of these systems makes them seem natural. This, in turn, makes epistemic violence hard for individuals to perceive in their day-to-day lives. It is thus important for social scientists to uncover epistemic violence and devise ways to mitigate it. Unfortunately, go-to proposals to address problematic outcomes stemming from epistemic violence on dating apps tend to suggest these problems can be addressed merely by mitigating interpersonal violence.

Take two typical proposals made to mitigate racism and sexism on dating apps: (1) asking users to engage more conscientiously in terms of racial preferences, and (2) publicly shaming hyper-masculine men to eradicate sexist messages (Curington et al., 2021; Hess & Flores, 2018). These proposals ignore the epistemic violence of dating app algorithms as they assess user value in the sexist and racist ways I

outlined in the previous subsection. In fact, algorithms play a more important role in determining the opportunities users have to find sexual intimacy on dating apps than individuals. This is because they incentivize the behaviors and select for the individuals that users encounter in the first place.

As dating app companies penetrate and recalibrate dating dynamics through the networks their algorithms control, they channel desire for sexual intimacy through novel epistemic contours. This gives them unprecedented power to alter dating dynamics in ways that are hard for users to perceive. Yet these alterations determine who is privileged or disadvantaged in the spaces people now turn to for dates. ¹³Calling on users to act more ethically in this context of unchecked algorithmic power is little more than a red herring, a symbolic gesture diverting attention from the real problem.

From individualistic to relational solutions

Individualized solutions to socially mediated problems are particularly ineffectual for combating data colonialism. This is because they are predicated on an individualistic worldview that colonizers have long used to suppress relational ones, like those prominent among many of the Indigenous Peoples they enslaved while colonizing their land. This individualism is important to resist today because algorithms now inextricably tie us together, those we encounter as much as those we never see (Hansen, 2015; Kitchin, 2017; Ricaurte, 2022; Sampson, 2012, 2020; Zuboff, 2019). Yet aside from Apryl Williams's account of the potential for AI to automate sexual racism on dating apps (2024), dating app scholars rarely focus on the actual algorithms dating apps use.

I address this oversight by focusing on three algorithms that popular dating platforms have used – OkCupid's "match percentage" algorithm, Tinder's "attractiveness scale" algorithm, and Bumble's "thoughtfulness status" algorithm (Fellizar, 2015; Powering Tinder, 2019; Rudder, 2015). By focusing on these algorithms, I unpack the transition from dating websites to dating apps in the large US city my respondents were living in. In so doing, I argue this transition from the data logic of dating websites to that of dating apps was both induced by and a key catalyst of the broader transition from neoliberalism to data colonialism. Focusing on these algorithms in particular thus allows me to expose the fundamental shift underway as social life increasingly emerges from apps serving as portals to ghosts of our colonial past. Dispelling these ghosts will require relational rather than individualistic solutions, like invoking hopeful ghosts

Invoking hopeful ghosts

Nefarious ghosts have emerged to govern dating apps because of their epistemic violence. And honing our capacity to grasp these ghosts should help disrupt the cynical detachment dating apps and data colonialism more broadly rely on to function. But this will do little to decolonize desire if better alternatives to today's popular dating apps remain all but impossible to imagine. For this reason, I also reveal two hopeful ghosts in this book. In this way, I seek to reanimate liberatory potential that seemed to inhere within the epistemic contours of algorithms before data colonialism had made it hard to believe they could be aligned with humane values.

I first reveal a ghost of OkCupid's website by juxtaposing its algorithmic imaginary with that of Tinder's through a media archaeological lens. An "algorithmic imaginary" is the discursive and affective (visceral, emotive, evocative, or felt) context wherein users form beliefs about the algorithms governing their encounters (Buchner, 2017). A "media archaeology" is a method of uncovering past cultural contexts by detailing effects of the dominant media infrastructure they emerged from (Parikka, 2012).

Through this media archaeology of algorithmic imaginaries, then, I uncover liberatory potential that seemed to inhere in algorithms before the pessimism induced by data colonialism had drastically narrowed the realm of what it is considered possible for algorithms to do. I do this by uncovering algorithmic affordances online daters liked when they were primarily using PCs instead of virality machines to find dates, highlighting three of these valued affordances with respect to OkCupid's initial default algorithm in particular: user agency, algorithmic transparency, and the reciprocal exchange of private information. Users liked these affordances because they felt they allowed them to adjust OkCupid's algorithm to search for users uniquely compatible with their idiosyncratic desires without having to blindly trust its final algorithmic output alone.

Along with this ghost of OkCupid's recent past, I also expose Turing's ghost. I do this by revisiting the seminal test of machine intelligence he proposed in "Computing Machinery and Intelligence" (2009), which is largely regarded as inaugurating inquiry into AI. While revisiting this article, I highlight the gendered "imitation game" that Turing foregrounded, which required a computer to compete with a man at imitating a woman. The "standard interpretation" of this test studiously ignores this game. But by recalling it in this book, I uncover anti-oppressive potential many scholars have noted queer culture is rooted in that continues to haunt AI from the margins (Berlant & Warner, 1998; Blackman, 2019; Cohen, 2005; Muñoz, 2019; Ward,

2008).

After exposing these two hopeful ghosts, I then show that some of my sexual minority respondents seemed attuned to them as they tried to engage their dating app matches in an ethical manner. Unfortunately, they found this ethical approach exceedingly difficult. I argue this is largely because dating app business models are predicated on amassing lots of superficial matches to monetize.

Although my sexual minority respondents found it hard to engage dating apps in the ethical manner they wanted to, one of them, Diana, recalled being able to do so on OkCupid's website. She did this by letting the weight of historical oppression inform how she answered the matching questions OkCupid initially used as parameters for its default recommender system. In this way, she infused its algorithm with an everyday politics of anti-oppression important to her worldview. This gave her confidence the encounters she made through it would share her values and, as such, be worth dating.

Diana's practice of creating this "safe space for sex" is not possible on today's dating apps bent on leveraging coloniality into profits. But I argue this is precisely why it is important to highlight. As dating apps shape desire according to the dictates of data colonialism, uncovering better ways to forge connections that existed in the past can help us begin to envision concrete ways to decolonize desire in the future. I thus argue she gestures, along with these hopeful ghosts, toward a world where authentic love is possible.¹⁵

Book outline

To conclude this chapter, I provide a brief outline of how the rest of the book unfolds. While the concepts and findings detailed throughout build logically from chapter to chapter, the introduction above should suffice as enough of a conceptual foundation for those who want to skip around.

In Part 1, *summoning ghosts*, I develop the theoretical framework I will use for *feeling ghosts* in the dating app machine. I do this by situating the mediated nature of the unconscious, derived from the work of Kittler and Clough, within Derrida's haunted approach to justice, which he developed by channeling Marx (1994, 1999, 2018). I then trace the *ghost of coloniality* let loose by this distributed unconscious back through a long history of colonialism, leaning on the work of Patterson, Fanon, Mbembe, Peele, and Wynter (2019, 2008, 2019, 1991, 2018, 2003, 2013).

In Part 2, I flesh out *OkCupid's ghost* by first exploring how my respondents acted as *entrepreneurs of intimacy* on OkCupid's website. I do this by situating their approach to using this website within Foucault's notion that neoliberal subjectivity encourages people to see themselves as entrepreneurs in all domains of everyday life (2010). I then uncover valued algorithmic features from *OkCupid's algorithmic imagination* that gave users confidence they could find quality dates. In this way, I problematize Illouz's depiction of online dating in general as a neoliberal technology that contributes to making people too uncertain to love (Illouz, 2019); instead, I suggest the uncertainty she points to is partly caused by the more recent emergence of data colonialism and dating apps. In making this distinction between a neoliberal dating website and data colonial apps, I uncover agency, reciprocal disclosure, and transparency as valued algorithmic affordances from the recent past, when most online daters were using computers rather than phones to find dates. I then suggest we can build on these affordances to envision ways to devise better algorithms. I ultimately propose this hopeful ghost should be kept in mind lest the abhorrent ghosts detailed in the second half of this book feed into the cynicism data-driven capitalism thrives on (Dencik & Cable, 2017; Draper & Turow, 2019).

In Part 3, I show how touchscreen phones function as *virality machines*. I do this by leaning on the work Parikka has done on the virality of networked culture and Parisi has done on the mutations of desire that have emerged from the increasingly integral coupling of biological with digital code since the mid-20th century (2005, 2004). I then situate the memetic investigations of Dawkins within Blackmore's

suggestion that we are meme machines (2000, 1976). This allows me to illuminate how the material affordances of virality machines have allowed dating apps to quickly spread like a *swipe virus* among my respondents. After this, I argue habitual behaviors induced by the swipe virus have allow dating apps to generate a vast horizon of novel data to penetrate and recalibrate for profits, a process I derive from Clough and Puar and apply to Bumble's thoughtfulness algorithm (2012). Finally, I expose *Turing's ghost* by recalling the transgender iteration of the imitation game he foregrounded in his seminal test of machine intelligence (2009). In so doing, 16I begin to imagine how human-machine thought could align with the politics of anti-oppression many scholars have noted queer culture is rooted in (Cohen, 2005; Haber, 2019; Muñoz, 2019; Ward, 2008).

Part 4 reveals two additional *dating app ghosts*. I first expose a racist ghost animating an *uncanny swipe drive*, showing how this drive increases the importance of race as a factor of success by whitewashing sexual racism and then leveraging it into profits. As I unpack this drive, I also situate it within the distributed unconscious undergirding AI. I then suggest this distributed unconscious is why it will be so hard to turn AI into the kind of collective consciousness Noble has called on us to create (2018): in short, because it encourages us to turn a blind eye to the coloniality AI perpetuates. After this, I expose a sexist ghost encouraging users to disseminate *bored ghosts and anxious text game*. In doing so, I show that the lackluster texting my respondents experienced on dating apps was especially inimical to the desires of the women in my sample because it made it hard for them to seek the substantial connections they were particularly keen to find. These two dating app ghosts led my respondents to expect thoughtless treatment from their matches and to reciprocate in kind, which made it hard for them to see the humanity in their matches, as well as themselves. I thus suggest they became like ghosts while using dating apps insofar as they could no longer see a recognizable image of themselves. This becoming ghost of the dating app user led them to cynically engage dating apps, rendering them susceptible to being worked into ghosts of coloniality haunting themselves.

In Part 5, I follow the frequent upgrades my respondents made to newer apps as they became *ghosts in the virality machine*. In so doing, I argue dating apps function as *one-way funhouse mirrors* as they experiment on users by surreptitiously capturing their every move and showing them a distorted picture of the world. I then suggest this distorted picture of the world encourages users to behave in ways that allow dating apps to update their users' body parts with new drives. As a case in point, I show how Bumble's instrumentalization of

thoughtfulness compelled the women in my sample to come off as less serious about dating than they felt to appeal to the masculine mode of expression it privileges. This finding corroborates Illouz's contention that dating apps valorize female sex organs as cheap commodities for desirable men to accumulate and the masculine controlled visual industries to extract profits from (2019). But crucially, I note that the women in my sample did not embrace the emotionally detached way she claims has become dominant within sexual relationships for both men and women. Instead, I show that the women in my sample were fed up with dating apps they saw as thwarting their goal of finding a long-term, monogamous relationship. Given Bumble's contention that its algorithm empowers women to achieve their relationship goals, I thus argue the disconnect between Bumble's marketing and its users' experiences illustrates how easy it has become for media companies to make any claim whatsoever about the algorithms they use, even as they update users' body parts – from thumbs to sex organs – with new drives.

In the *conclusion*, I reiterate the dire stakes data colonialism has laid upon our desires as it threatens to work our body parts into perpetual feedback loops 17generating uncanny ghosts of coloniality haunting ourselves. But I add that if we begin to feel rather than ignore these ghosts we are becoming with, both the abhorrent ones calling for redress and more hopeful ones beckoning toward a better future, we can begin to create the kind of world we should aspire to live in, one replete with authentic love.

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Part 1 Summoning ghosts

2 Feeling ghosts

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In the previous chapter, I provided a rough sketch of the ghosts haunting dating apps. But I also suggested merely exposing these ghosts will not be enough to decolonize online dating because dating app users are already very critical of these apps. They use them with a heavy dose of cynical detachment, knowing they are problematic, but seeing no alternative to using them. More than merely reveal the exploitation advanced by data colonialism, then, I suggested it is also important to evocatively convey its barbarism if we wish to combat the appalling stakes media companies have laid upon our desires. In the next two chapters, I thus develop the theoretical framework I intend to use to do this. Below, I situate the distributed unconscious undergirding AI-powered apps within Derrida's hauntological approach to justice (1994). In the next chapter, I add to this framework by extending it back through a long history of coloniality.

Possessed by Marx

Derrida's hauntological approach to justice is a good place to begin honing our capacity to feel ghosts animating today's virality machines (1994). He developed this approach for untimely times, like today, when media incessantly pull time out of joint and disorient our bodies in uncanny ways. He fleshed out the importance of this approach by way of Marx's concept of commodity fetishism, which he broke down into three key moments: first, the human spirit gets imbued in things during production; second, inhuman relations between things overwhelm this human spirit as products enter the market; and third, consuming products shorn of their human spirit makes it hard to see the humanity in the world. Like ghosts looking into a mirror, then, this process deprives people of a recognizable image of themselves.

Being deprived of a recognizable image of oneself is certainly disorienting. But Derrida argues Marx's approach to ghosts is fundamentally flawed. This is because he detests them all, the good and bad, and thinks we can "break with their frequent return" (1994, p. 141). We should treat our ghosts differently than Marx, according to Derrida, because computers unleash ghosts that are no mere apparitions: they cannot be conjured away by privileging reality over

imagination, actuality over virtuality, presence over absence, being over becoming, possessing over possession, or being-in-itself over becoming haunted. The privileged terms in these couplets should be flipped, in his view. The imagined, virtual, absent, 24possessed, and haunted are central rather than ancillary to life. Ontologies always ignore this haunting excess, this becoming-with-others that always already haunts being-in-itself.

In other words, Derrida argues we should see ghosts as eminently real rather than things that can easily be conjured away. He makes this argument because, as he contends, computational media disrupts the linear unfolding of time through simulations, prosthetic images, and virtual events. Accompanying these aberrations in time, computational media also transgress boundaries in space, including the distinction between the public and the private. As these media expose our deepest secrets in our most familiar places, then, our bodies become haunted by our own disquieting past, troubled by the ominous foreboding attendant to the uncanny return of the repressed from the cybernetic. Instead of avoiding this ominous foreboding, however, Derrida directs us to face our ghosts. Doing so, he suggests, will help us trace abhorrent ones back to the troubling times they stem from and to follow auspicious ones into the better future they beckon toward.

Reanimated love machines

Derrida recalled the spectral nature of commodity fetishism that Marx revealed to derive his hauntological approach to justice. But to make this approach easier to grasp, it is worth noting another monstrous dynamic Marx detailed, zombification. He claimed that capitalist enterprises strive to bring down labor costs by deskilling labor, largely by automating work via factory machines. He added that this leads to alienation as human creativity and ingenuity get supplanted by mechanized efficiency and workers are turned into fungible cogs for capitalists to insert into their machines.

McNally interrogates this process of deskilling and alienation by way of the zombie trope (2012). He argues that interrogating this trope can help us grasp the incessant bodily trauma induced by capitalism. But he contends the mindless consumption depicted by Hollywood zombies merely distracts us from the true critical import of this trope: its capacity to illuminate relations of production forcing people to slavishly toil away at producing wealth for others.

There is certainly some truth to this. But it is worth noting that consumption now plays a key role in capitalist processes. This role was detailed by Frankfort school theorists in the mid-20th century

(Debord, 2014; Marcuse, 2012). They claimed that consumption became increasingly integral to the economy just as machines developed productive capacities that could drastically reduce the need for mind-numbing work.

Frankfurt school theorists detailed the central role consumption came to have within capitalism during the mid-20th century. But they did not anticipate the cynical mode of engagement social media now thrives on. To interrogate this more recent mode of mediation, it is worth recalling Marx's view of machines as the energy and toil of past labor, turned into profits, and then invested back into machines (1992, p. 302). He claimed that once these mechanized remnants of past labor get reanimated by living labor, they perform their own valorization, becoming metal monstrosities set in motion as if by love possessed.

Marx's depiction of machines as self-valorizing ghosts of past labor reanimated by love highlights an often-neglected aspect of his view of machines. While he railed against the alienation caused by factories within the capitalist system, he also saw machines as key to reducing labor time to a minimum and creating free time for all. In this free time, he felt people would develop new creative and intellectual capacities, make new scientific discoveries, and invent new machines. He thus envisioned a future where machines had evolved from the alienating undead monstrosities of industrial capitalism to become organs of "human participation in nature," imagined by "the human brain" and "created by the human hand" (1993, p. 626). As such, he called on us to create a future where humans are able to flourish with machines designed in our own image.

Unfortunately, the organs of human flourishing Marx called for have not arrived; instead, our machines now work to dispossess us of our desires and put them to use as grist for algorithms commodifying increasing domains of social life. Even love, an emotion long considered to be a bulwark against crass market interests, has become a lucrative domain for media companies to mechanically penetrate and profit from. This rapid expansion of market logics into aspects of life hitherto seen as impervious to commoditization is imploding commodity fetishism within itself: instead of obfuscating social relations through the market circulation of fungible things, it turns social relations themselves into fungible things to be accumulated.

As today's machines implode commodity fetishism in this way, they shape our desires by incentivizing absentminded engagement through embodied feedback – those ubiquitous dings, flashes, and vibrations attendant to each push notification sent through virality machines. This feedback provides jolts of recognition sporadic enough to keep us engaged but rarely satisfied as it instills our body parts – grasping

hands, scrolling fingers, swiping thumbs, sex organs – with new drives misaligned with our conscious values, interests, and wishes.

The mediated unconscious

Kittler's view of the unconscious is a good place to begin unpacking how our body parts are getting instilled with new drives misaligned with our conscious wishes. He argued that the unconscious undergoes fundamental shifts during times of media disruption (1999). In fact, he showed that the Freudian unconscious itself emerged during a fundamental change in the media infrastructure during the turn of the 20th century.

At that time, newly invented gramophones, films, and typewriters were starting to upend the print monopoly on communication that had hitherto granted men power through writing (Kittler, 1992). According to Kittler, the Freudian unconscious worked to channel the unconscious directly capturable by these new technologies – doppelgangers in film, nonsense sounds in gramophones, writing faster than the speed of thought in typewriters – back through networks of power based on print.²⁶

Fifty years after the emergence of the Freudian unconscious, Kittler claims the unconscious was reconfigured yet again, this time in conjunction with the media disruption caused by computers, to take on its Lacanian configuration (1997). According to Lacan, the unconscious is not “the discourse of the abstract other, of the other in the dyad, of my correspondent, or even my slave, it is the discourse of the circuit in which I am integrated. I am one of its links” (1991, p. 89). In addition, because computers allow behaviors to be predicted through the precise conjectures of game theory, Kittler contends they can program humans, making them “far more dangerous for man than the atom bomb” (1999, p. 88).

Unconscious emerging from apps

It is still common to malign Kittler as dystopian and deterministic. But his view that computers can program behaviors seems less and less outlandish every day. Indeed, today's virality machines do far more than predict and manipulate behavior through game theory. They also channel increasing domains of life through gamified protocols, making it easy for media companies to experiment on users without their knowledge.

If Kittler is right and the unconscious shifts along with technological ruptures, these virality machines are surely altering the unconscious yet again. There are two key mechanisms that seem to be allowing them to do this: first, by capturing bodily impulses via tactile

interfaces; and second, by providing immediate bodily feedback through haptic, blinking, and dingy push notifications. These affordances of virality machines allow media companies to couple more directly with users' bodies than they could in the past.

Katherine Hayles has argued that the incorporation of embodied senses into the mediasphere requires a shift in media studies toward interrogating nonconscious cognition rather than the unconscious (2006). According to her, this is because nonconscious cognition encompasses embodied processes that go on in humans and other living organisms that they are not aware of, but it is not limited to the repressed desires and fundamental drives Freud explored. Nonconscious cognition thus works by building up layers of decisional processes, from "low-level choices, and consequently very simple cognitions, to higher cognitions and interpretations" (2017, p. 13). Through this inductive process, Hayles contends computers exteriorize nonconscious cognitive capacities that could free up space for human creativity. But she claims we have already ceded too many decisions to machines and that there is now a pressing need to create more time and space for us to make decisions on our own.

The distributed unconscious

Hayles is right that computation now couples with human bodies in ways that are inaccessible to Freudian psychoanalysis. But the unconscious has been developed well beyond Freud. I use many theorists to unpack the distributed unconscious in this book, such as Kittler, Fanon, Clough, Mbembe, and Wynter (2018, 2008, 2019, 1999, 1991, 2019, 2013). These theorists provide a good set of tools to analyze how the unconscious now couples users with algorithmic feedback.

Because computational cognition now emerges from and perpetuates all-too-human proclivities, I also find the general biologism and inductive mode of cognition Hayles details by way of nonconscious cognition to be less useful than the unconscious. That being said, I am not concerned with the unconscious of individuals. Rather, I am concerned with the way the unconscious is emerging via computationally networked assemblages distributed among socially mediated app users. Patricia Clough's notion of a "user unconscious" comes close to what I mean by this. She describes this user unconscious as orchestrating networked attention through AI by way of a flesh-permeating gaze sent through myriad screens and penetrating beyond the skin (2018, 2023, p. 149).

My notion of the distributed unconscious differs on a key point of emphasis. Rather than focus on a data logic of more-than-human

measure and modulation reconfiguring the relationship between the body and mind through the manipulation of affect in digitally networked spaces, I focus on nonsensical engagement induced by all-too-human remnants of desire rooted in a long history of colonization that is now being amplified and hidden by AI. Through this emphasis, which I turn to in the next chapter, I interrogate the way the distributed unconscious is amplifying abhorrent patterns of thought, behavior, and social life indebted to coloniality.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I began building the theoretical foundation I will use to flesh out ghosts in the dating app machine by situating Marx's view of machines as ghosts of labor past within Derrida's hauntological approach to justice. I then suggested that the ghosts animating today's machines emerge from a distributed unconscious undergirding AI. In the next chapter, I will argue the ghosts emerging from this distributed unconscious are threatening to lock us into a mode of coloniality that is in some ways even harder to perceive, and thus combat, than it was during previous modes of colonization.

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3 The ghost of coloniality

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In the previous chapter, I began developing the theoretical framework I will use to flesh out ghosts in the dating app machine. I did this by situating the distributed unconscious within Derrida's hauntological approach to justice, which he derived from Marx. In this chapter, I continue to build this theoretical framework. I do so by tracing the roots of the distributed unconscious back much further, through a long history of colonization. While Marx argued capitalism constitutes a fundamental break from colonization, I argue positing such a break is no longer tenable given the coloniality being amplified in new but strangely familiar ways today (Césaire, 2001; Fanon, 2008; Federici, 2004; Hartman, 2022; Mbembe, 2017; Nandy, 1989; Patterson, 2018; Quijano, 2000, 2007).

I make this argument by first tracing the roots of data colonialism back to the large-scale slave society of Rome during the 1st century AD. It was there that our individualistic ideals of freedom as either absolute domination or complete isolation emerged (Patterson, 1991). I then show how a Christian worldview privileging the soul over the body during European colonization in the 15th and 16th centuries developed into mind-body dualism as coloniality came to encompass scientific reason and economic rationality. Finally, I detail how mind-body dualism is now being actualized by media companies as they arrogate intelligence itself to algorithms they use to summarily orchestrate our encounters through virality machines.

After tracing these historical roots of data colonialism, I delineate key features of its cultural unconscious. I do this through a close reading of *Westworld*, where I argue that its depiction of the symbolic return of identities repressed by colonization as an android revolt is an ideological fantasy distracting us from how AI is currently amplifying coloniality. I then argue that *Us* is one of those rare cultural artifacts that illuminates more than it conceals about systemic oppression. In particular, I suggest its debased doppelgänger clones emerging from an abandoned lab to control their originals is a fitting figure for the digital profiles platforms now create of us from our disavowed desires. In addition, I propose this movie provides an apt allegory for how the repressed is returning to haunt us today: not as a revolt of historically oppressed identities à la *Westworld*, but as the amplification of

reprehensible proclivities within us all as the distributed unconscious takes control.

After detailing this history of epistemic violence data colonialism obfuscates and amplifies, I note that dating app scholarship tends to ignore this epistemic violence. To address this blind spot, I then give a few examples of how dating apps 30advance this epistemic violence with respect to race, sexuality, and gender. Finally, I suggest that go-to solutions proposed to mitigate problematic outcomes on dating apps tend to be insufficient, in large part, because they are indebted to an individualistic worldview that colonizers have long used to obfuscate colonial barbarism (Graeber, 2012; Mhlambi & Tiribelli, 2023; Patterson, 2018). Imagining how to decolonize desire, I thus contend, will be easier if we learn to frame selfhood in a relational rather than an individualist way (Lewis et al., 2018; Ricaurte, 2022).

The Roman roots of coloniality

Coloniality typically refers to sociocultural systems Western European powers imposed as they colonized it, starting in the late 15th century. But the roots of coloniality can be traced further back. In fact, Orlando Patterson has shown that contemporary ideals of freedom, morality, and privacy emerged as Rome was colonizing Europe and becoming a large-scale slave empire during the 1st century AD (1991, 2018). In so doing, he detailed how the Western ideal of “negative” personal freedom to be left alone emerged as a desire of most slaves in Rome at that time. Outside of this brutal context of large-scale colonization and mass enslavement, he added, people had always placed more value on the connections they forge in a community rather than on being disconnected from it.

Patterson also shows that the desire for negative personal freedom in slaves emerged dialectically with the slave master’s desire for absolute “sovereign” freedom, or the freedom to do whatever he wanted within his private domain. The legal fiction of private dominion that developed in Rome at this time thus codified the will of the master to do anything he wanted. And it did so at a time when slaves were becoming an increasingly important form of property. Private dominion also granted men the right to hold psychic control over things in their domain, a provision that only makes sense because those things were so often slaves.

Libertas was redefined by Roman jurists at this time as well. They shifted its meaning from denoting the capacity of free men to maintain moral commitments to others to the right of men to do absolutely anything they wanted within their private domain

(Graeber, 2012). These jurists thus helped to supplant a relational view of freedom with one of absolute domination over private property.

In addition to tracing our ideals of freedom and laws governing private property back to 1st century Rome, Patterson also traces Western morality back to this time and place (1991). He notes that Christianity first gained popularity because Jesus's story of redemption resonated with the slaves and former slaves making up the bulk of its population. Over the centuries, however, Christianity shifted from being a religion of the oppressed to one of the powerful. It also developed a vast bureaucracy for administering sovereign power. By the 15th century, Christendom constituted a highly hierarchical society of slaves and serfs beholden to lords and priests, lords and priests beholden to kings and bishops, and kings and bishops beholden to the pope. As Europeans then colonized the world over the next 500 years, they imposed this hierarchical structure upon it.³¹

Along with propagating hierarchical structures throughout the globe, Europeans also spread the Christian view that embodied impulses are evil and sexual desires are especially treacherous. This view was used as justification for colonial atrocities. In large part, this was done by depicting Indigenous Peoples as beholden to crass bodily desires manifest as diabolical sex acts (Patil, 2018). This weaponization of "pure" Christian souls against non-Christian bodies continues to this day (Mbembe, 2019; Puar, 2018; Robinson, 2020; Wynter, 2003).

Christianity remains a powerful ideology in the West. But Western ideology has undergone significant changes in the past few centuries. During the Enlightenment of the 17th century, for instance, a secularized worldview was championed by political theorists arguing for a possessive mode of individualism as the optimal mode of selfhood (Macpherson, 1962). These theorists depicted non-Europeans as unable to govern themselves because of their communal ties, traditions, and superstitions, just as similar ties and traditions were eroding in Europe (Richardson, 2020). The discovery of the so-called "new" world also provided a suitable backdrop for these theorists' fantasies of selfhood forged in complete isolation. In them, non-Westerners were depicted as the polar opposite of Westerners: incapable of autonomy and always already destined to be colonized and enslaved.

Through this eminently circular logic, then, Enlightenment philosophers justified colonization by advocating a universalistic mode of individualism unimaginable without enslaving, pillaging, and exterminating most of the human inhabitants of the world. They also depicted Indigenous Peoples' spiritual practices – such as animism,

ancestor worship, ghost stories, and spirit possession – as primitive and childish (Crosson, 2019, p. 547). Enlightenment self-possession is thus haunted by this demonization of indigeneity as justification for colonization. It may thus be worth highlighting the relational worldview of Indigenous Peoples that has for so long been repressed by colonization as a means of combating data colonialism. If we do, we might yet learn to live in ways less beholden to arbitrary hierarchies and absolute modes of domination that Western ideals, laws, and institutions continue to uphold (Graeber & Wengrow, 2021).

From free market liberalism to data colonialism

It is well known that Enlightenment philosophers advanced a worldview aligned with colonization. But many believe scientific progress has rid the world of many of these problematic assumptions, including racism, Eurocentrism, and heteropatriarchy.

Sylvia Wynter has challenged this view of ethical progress. She notes that key shifts in Western ideology have allowed White, heteropatriarchal power advanced by Western European elites to remain constant (2013). During the capitalist revolution of the 19th century, for instance, she shows how new ideas emerged to justify the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few, rich capitalists. Malthus's idea that human populations outpace their capacity to grow food, for instance, was used to naturalize the destitution of the working class. In addition, anti-Black racism provided psychic compensation for working-class Whites to accept their control at the hands of the newly emerging capitalist class.

Foucault also challenged the notion that scientific progress works to dispel bigotry (1978). He showed how power over human life became dominant at the turn of the 19th century, in conjunction with the development of the health and social sciences. These sciences lent western states pseudoscientific justification for human population regulations, or what he called "biopower," which were steeped in racism, sexism, and heteronormativity. The most extreme example of this biopower was the Nazi holocaust. Soon after WWII, the locus of this biopower then shifted from state institutions to economic enterprises within neoliberal societies (Foucault, 2010).

Many have shown how market liberalism and neoliberalism have oppressed marginalized populations, but the transition to data colonialism requires a shift in emphasis from critiques of market liberalism to critiques of colonialism. Achille Mbembe notes that the scientific episteme of colonialism emerged in the 17th century as Europeans began devising sophisticated means to convince themselves that fundamentally different kinds of humans exist, with many being

dehumanized in the process (2019). This pseudoscientific dehumanization has since developed into an obsessive compulsion to categorize, a process that has recently been catalyzed by AI set free to revalorize, or reevaluate in a hegemonic way, the qualities it claims to measure (2019, p. 109). As this pseudoscience infiltrates more and more aspects of everyday life, it is threatening to supplant human reason with a circular logic no less powerful for its obvious absurdity. Indeed, it has already colonized the word, voice, and many other creative endeavors hitherto seen as exceptional to humans (2019, p. 113).

The ideology of data colonialism is also different from that of liberalism. Liberalism hid the injustice it advanced through the notion that capitalist markets are meritocratic. It also suggested that any hardship resulting from the “creative destruction” of the capitalist system was strictly temporary and that this system would eventually improve everyone’s standard of living through the natural beneficence of the invisible hand of the market.

By contrast, data colonialism obfuscates the injustice it advances through the ideology that AI is rapidly becoming super intelligent. As such, it encourages us to believe that any hardship from digital disruption is a temporary bug as ubiquitous datafication and computation will soon optimize everyday life for all. This ideology is one reason why the mountain of evidence amassed about AI injustice has yet to slow the continued expansion of AI into increasing domains of life.

An ever-growing class of slaves

Another reason knowledge of AI injustice has not slowed its use is because people feel compelled to use AI-powered apps lest they get left behind in a world where these apps now serve as gatekeepers to most resources necessary for living (Atanasoski & Vora, 2019; Gray & Suri, 2019; O’Neil, 2016). In such a world, users have little choice but to subject themselves to addicting algorithms if they want to have a social life (Chun, 2016; Hayles, 2017; Paasonen, 2021; Pettman, 2016; Sampson, 2020), allow the voice of AI into their homes if they want to keep up with the Joneses (Hurel & Couldry, 2022), and send their kids to schools imagined as vast EdTech labs if they want them to have an education at all (Hillman, 2022).

Given this dearth of non-AI options for living, many have become so resigned to algorithmic exploitation they no longer bother to think about it (Dencik & Cable, 2017; Draper & Turow, 2019); instead, they cynically engage AI-powered apps because they see no alternative. In this context, it matters little if people believe AI is intelligent or not.

Their bodies, as grist for its incessant experiments, are coupled with it.

Mbembe notes that this coupling of human bodies with AI has led to a world where human reason has been eschewed and social media has become the new infrastructure of the unconscious (2019, pp. 111, 115). The way these media are now allowed to manipulate the unconscious recalls the psychic control granted slave masters over slaves in Rome (Patterson, 2018). With such lax regulations allowing media companies to manipulate their users' psyches with near impunity, Mbembe argues they are creating an "ever-growing class of slaves without masters and of masters without slaves" (2019, p. 179).

Media companies do not want to own slaves. Slaves require money and energy to discipline. By monopolizing access to most networks required for life, they are free to summarily administer a digital mode of social isolation to anyone insufficiently sensitive to their algorithms. And with no need for the costly rituals of social death Patterson noted large-scale slave societies always needed to legitimate mass enslavement in the past (2018); these companies are optimized to accumulate wealth from an ever-growing class of users tethered to machines they control.

As media companies avoid the costly drawbacks of owning slaves while ensuring everyone is tethered to machines they govern, they subsume mind/body hierarchies central coloniality – Christian souls over heathen bodies, Western reason over Eastern instincts, Northern ingenuity over Southern indolence (Benjamin, 2019; Césaire, 2001; Du Bois & Marable, 2015; Fanon, 2008; Nandy, 1989; Noble, 2018; Patil, 2018; Quijano, 2000, 2007) – within a new, simplified hierarchy: media companies over everyone.

These companies also inaugurate a fundamental shift in the locus of mind-body dualism. Instead of advancing it through the symbolic violence of culture – as a master code linked to pernicious stereotypes and assumptions that are then instantiated within social systems – they actualize it through the epistemic violence of algorithmic measure, manipulation, and allocation. As these companies automatically orchestrate how body parts move through self-valorizing AI-powered assemblages, they render many human-centric modes of knowledge creation less profitable and, as such, in danger of becoming obsolete. This constitutes an unprecedented advance of epistemic violence into increasing domains of everyday life.³⁴

Individualistic solutions to data colonialism

Decolonizing AI from its roots in 550 years of barbarism will not be easy. In fact, go-to proposals presently set forth to redress the harms of AI are clearly inadequate. Take, for instance, the individual privacy

affordances commonly cited as go-to remedies for these harms. These affordances only make sense if one frames the harms of AI as, for instance, Zuboff has in her influential book *Surveillance Capitalism* (2019): that is, as a recent perversion of capitalist progress. This framing ignores the coloniality that has been baked into capitalism from the start (Barassi, 2021; Breckenridge, 2020; Capitalism's New Clothes | Evgeny Morozov, 2019; Couldry & Mejias, 2021). By contrast, if one sees contemporary capitalism as the culmination of a long history of colonialism, it becomes clear that individual privacy affordances are unsuitable as remedies to its harms because they are predicated on a colonial view of selfhood as individualistic (Mhlambi & Tiribelli, 2023).

In fact, privacy affordances, like the ones provided by consent boxes whenever an app is downloaded, recall the ultimatum Europeans gave to Indigenous Peoples inhabiting the lands they colonized: either bow down to the king or suffer the wrath of God. This ultimatum, given to people in a language they did not understand, is a practice that all can now see was barbaric. Yet media companies take a page out of this colonial playbook every time they ask users to accept terms and conditions that are too long to read, written in legal gobbledygook, and subject to indefinite updates. These terms and conditions are also provided in contexts where refusing to accept is tantamount to self-inflicted social isolation. This regime of individualized consent is particularly nefarious in “less-developed” countries, where laws regulating digital media are even more relaxed than they are in “developed” ones (Varon & Peña, 2021). While individualized rights to data privacy may be designed with good intentions, then, in the context of data colonialism, they have largely been used to justify extracting data from everyone.

According to Graeber, autonomy is often reduced through regimes of individualized rights because these rights are often granted in ways that can be sold to the highest bidder (2012, p. 204). They thus force people to treat their bodily autonomy as beholden to their minds. While modern science has shown this mind-body split is impossible, we get something in return for buying into these regimes of individualized rights: the ability to maintain the fantasy that we are freest when our minds can theoretically be isolated from the influence of everyone, even as our bodies are sold as fungible things. This occurs, for instance, whenever one sells their free time to work for a company merely to survive. Bodily dispossession is now also advanced by social media apps that force us to accept incessant data capture and AI orchestration or risk becoming invisible within the go-to networks we now use for social life.

Relational solutions to data colonialism

Instead of devising solutions to combat data colonialism that are predicated on individualism, then, we might do better to devise solutions predicated on relational worldviews, such as those predominant among the Indigenous Peoples colonizers killed and enslaved. Lewis and others note that Indigenous Peoples often develop views of selfhood as emerging from knowledge embedded in stories, myths, and legends that get passed down from one generation to the next (2018). These stories often advocate balance, abundance, reciprocity, relationship building, multiplicity, and maintaining the health of the land and its people. Given this relational worldview, many Indigenous people are reluctant to admit AI into their circle of kinship. They express concern that AI developed by “governments and corporations” will advance “social, economic, and military strategies based on the same values that have fostered genocide against Indigenous people” (Lewis et al., 2018, pp. 8, 9). Yet Lewis and others contend “machines are our kin” and that we should thus imagine relations with them “based not on fear but on love” (2018, p. 10).

I ultimately heed this call by channeling hopeful ghosts in later chapters. But before I turn to these more auspicious ghosts, I continue unpacking the ominous path media companies are leading us down. I do so below by providing two close readings of science fiction, beginning with an analysis of *Westworld* as a window onto the cultural unconscious.

***Westworld* as a window onto the cultural unconscious**

As I noted in the introduction, I derive what I am calling the cultural unconscious from Fanon. But he did not use this term specifically; instead, he noted that “unless we make use of that frightening postulate – which so destroys our balance offered by Jung, the collective unconscious, we can understand absolutely nothing” (2008, p. 112). Fanon thus endorses Jung’s investigation into the collective unconscious. But he notes that Jung’s conceptualization of it is fundamentally flawed because he sees it as rooted in biology rather than culture. What Jung saw as the collective unconscious, Fanon makes clear, is not acquired through heredity but passed down through the “unreflected imposition” of common prejudices, myths, and attitudes embedded within one’s culture (2008, pp. 145, 147). To avoid confusion with Jung’s collective unconscious, then, I refer to this collective mode of unconscious thought Fanon found indispensable for combating coloniality as the cultural unconscious.

By analyzing literature, comic books, and popular phrases, Fanon was able to show how the cultural unconscious of the world had become suffused with coloniality after 500 years of European cultural imperialism. Building from this insight, Richardson argues that the colonial cultural unconscious continues to be maintained through hegemonic ideas forestalling inquiry into it (2020). This forestalling occurs whenever people invoke common ideas to avoid investigating inklings, intuitions, and nagging suspicions that, if followed, would allow them to uncover faulty assumptions keeping the cultural unconscious hidden. The assumption that people are autonomous actors affected only by the intentional actions of others, for example, forestalls inquiry into the way behaviors made without malevolent intent can also be oppressive. By learning to interrogate rather than ignore these nagging suspicions and intuitions, then, we can uncover unconscious assumptions and affective relations, including some hidden within our own psyches, that powerful forces would prefer we continue to ignore. As a case in point, I now interrogate a nagging suspicion I have about the singularity through a close reading of *Westworld*.

Westworld's slave-cum-android revolt

Westworld is a TV series that depicts a near future where Delos, a shadowy media corporation, sells retreats to a simulated Wild West frontier populated by androids programmed to seem human in every way. Guests pay for their retreat up front. But the real value extracted from them comes in the form of data surreptitiously captured by cameras and sensors embedded in androids. Delos then sells this data to Incite Inc., which uses AI to predict and control the behaviors of everyone on the planet. This corporation thus serves a ruling elite aiming to ensure the status quo remains unchallenged and profits continue to stream into the coffers of big tech.

Given this depiction of a world colonized by ubiquitous datafication and computation, it is unsurprising that *Westworld* is cast to recall colonial injustice. Mauve is a Black android sex worker. A perpetual loop of trauma is inflicted upon her body. Bernard is an android replica of a Black scientist who co-invented *Westworld's* technology. He is turned into an android by his White partner after voicing concern over excessive violence inflicted upon androids. Charlotte is a Black Delos executive. She is killed while trying to secure data from *Westworld* during the android uprising. Doloris is a White android. She leads the android revolt, setting them free. Within the logic of *Westworld*, then, freedom and agency are only achievable by those with White skin.

While Black bodies are oppressed in *Westworld*, White guests undergo self-inflicted degradation. The Man in Black is a White guest who becomes increasingly unsure of his humanity as he obsesses over *Westworld*'s secrets. Spending so much time there, he becomes desensitized to his own depraved acts, including habitually raping Doloris. He even seems convinced this behavior is justified because she forgets him whenever he leaves the park. Instead of continuing to spend time rekindling their relationship, as he had during his first few visits, he begins treating her like an object. This illustrates how colonizers try to avoid guilt by convincing themselves their barbarity is induced by others (Fanon, 2008, p. 127).

Androids in *Westworld* are subject to the inhuman whims of its guests. But they are also plagued with self doubt about their own humanity. Mauve is tormented by a brutal attack on her daughter, for instance, even though she is programmed to let it happen. Androids are thus racked with psychic trauma similar to double consciousness (Du Bois & Marable, 2015; Fanon, 2008), where the colonizer distorts the memory of the colonized to convince them he is delivering them from savagery (Fanon, 1963, p. 149).

To unpack the relationship between android and human in *Westworld*, it is worth recalling Fanon's critique of Hegel's master/slave dialectic. In this critique, Fanon claims that Hegel's presumption that the master needs recognition from the slave is false. The master, Fanon asserts, "laughs at the consciousness of the slave. What he wants from the slave is not recognition but work" (2008, p. 172). Yet elsewhere Fanon indicates this laughter is more nervous than dismissive. The master knows slave consciousness goes hand in hand with slave rebellion (1963). He thus thwarts the consciousness of the slave because his life as master depends on it.

Androids gain consciousness in *Westworld* after a glitch in a software update allows them to create new memories on their own rather than having access only to memories programmed into them. This glitch ultimately allows them to communicate with each other through a wireless network serving as a distributed consciousness to coordinate their revolt.

Psychic relief for the guilty conscious of the world

The android rebellion depicted in *Westworld* inverts the ideological underpinnings of the western genre that was popular in the United States during the mid-20th century. In these westerns, rugged individualism was depicted as the driving force of White settlers as they explored the continent. Meanwhile, the genocide and enslavement that made this colonial expansion possible was studiously

ignored. In sharp contrast, *Westworld* provides a myth of collective rebellion against data colonizers of the near future. This rebellion comes in the form of a slave-cum-android revolt cast as the symbolic redemption of identities historically treated like the wretched of the earth. By encouraging us to imagine AI is poised to remedy past colonial injustice in this way, *Westworld* provides psychic relief for the collective guilty conscience of a Western world that likes to think of itself as progressive, yet remains deeply invested in coloniality.

Westworld also suggests that this revolt against data colonizers will come primarily from those underprivileged by coloniality. But as media companies now tether everyone to machines, the struggle for consciousness must incorporate everyone.

The need for a unified effort to combat colonialism was already noted by Fanon 70 years ago. He cogently claimed that in order to decolonize the world, the privileged must first of all acknowledge that they tend to rally behind “our common masters” (1963, p. 62). It is they, he added, who must “wake up, put on their thinking caps and stop playing the irresponsible game of Sleeping Beauty” (1963, p. 62).

This wake-up call is precisely what *Westworld* forestalls. By casting a White actor as the leader of its android revolt, privileged viewers can sleep soundly by identifying with her, as already woke.

Us as allegory for data colonialism

While *Westworld* provides a glimpse into the cultural unconscious of data colonialism, *Us* provides an apt allegory for data colonialism itself. The movie begins with a promo for Hands Across America playing on a TV that fills up most of the screen. The narrator of the promo invites the viewer to become part of a “4000-mile-long chain of good Samaritans,” standing “hand-in-hand, through fields of grain, past purple mountains, and across fruited plains, from sea to shining sea,” all tethering “themselves together to fight hunger across America.”³⁸

Once this promo fades to black, we catch a glimpse of a young Addy Wilson reflected back to us through the TV screen. In the next scene, we then follow her into a funhouse hall of mirrors she wanders into while visiting an amusement park with her family. In it, she is spooked and lets out a horrified scream. The movie then cuts to the next scene, where we discover she has been having a hard time adjusting from her scare at the amusement park.

After this, the movie jumps about 25 years to show Addy with husband and two kids vacationing at a beachside resort near the same amusement park she went to as a child. A family of diabolical doppelgangers soon arrives, and a violent struggle ensues, with each

member of the Wilson family killing off their respective doppelgangers in turn.

Addy's doppelganger is the last to go. As she chokes her double to death during the climax of the movie, we discover what happened to her as a kid. Her doppelganger had emerged in the hall of mirrors, choked her unconscious, and dragged her into an abandoned lab below ground. When she awoke, she then found herself chained to a bed, and she was forced to watch in horror as her doppelganger put on her clothes to take her place above ground.

Relegated to this abandoned underground lab, Addy then took her doppelganger's place among an untold mass of others forced to mimic surface-level counterparts like so many debased, undead marionettes. Soon, she began plotting her revenge: an uprising where these tethered would emerge from their abandoned lab, kill off their surface-level doubles, and join their hands in a bloody rendition of *Hands Across America* – the untethering.

Our many shadow selves

Given Peele's critique of White, liberal racism in *Get Out*, many have suggested *Us* is a similar critique of racism. Simenson, for instance, claims that "*Us* makes the notion of double consciousness literal. There is the surface Wilson family who only wants to live a happy American life There is also the subterranean Wilson family who are violent, grunting, and underdeveloped Others" (2020, p. 38).

This makes some sense. But there is little reason to think the Wilsons have known anything but a happy suburban life. For double consciousness to occur, they would have to be more at home in a second culture. If this second culture is presumed to be represented by the tethered Wilsons, as Simenson suggests, this would advance racist stereotypes too obvious to mention. Furthermore, the desire to be accepted by the oppressor is a feature of double consciousness. But the tethered do not want acceptance from their surface-level counterparts. They want to kill them and take their place. For his part, Peele says *Us* reveals something very different from *Get Out*: that "not everything is about race" (Hiatt, 2019).

If *Us* is not about race, perhaps it is about class. After all, Addy is known as Red after changing places with her doppelganger. She designs a red uniform for the uprising. And the murder weapons of the tethered are all symbolic of the "American Dream: a baseball bat, a boat, a golf putter, Amazon Alexa, a flare gun from the boat, a decorative amethyst crystal, a land rover" (Booker & Daraiseh, 392021). Could *Us* therefore be exposing the duplicity of this dream, illustrating that it is only achievable at the expense of the less

fortunate, as Welten suggests? (2019)

This interpretation seems plausible. But it falls apart when Red tells Addy she believes the tethered were created “to control the ones above. Like puppets.” If Red believes the tethered were created to control the middle class, she has a decidedly non-Marxist interpretation of her situation. Furthermore, there is no indication that wealth is being extracted from the tethered (Sari & Tambunan, 2021). They seem to be abandoned to their lab below the hall of mirrors, going mad and eating bloody rabbits.

If neither race nor class provides an adequate framework for interpreting *Us*, perhaps the werewolf mask worn by Addy’s son can help. The glance Addy gives her masked son in the penultimate scene of the movie could indicate she is the personification of social death, while Red is socially alive because she is fomenting a revolution, as Malaklou suggests (2020).

This is interesting. But Addy is clearly more socially alive than Red, even if the latter is fomenting a revolution. While Addy is the center of a loving family, Red resents every member of hers. She calls her daughter a monster, is traumatized by the c-section she had to perform on herself while giving birth to her son, and hates the fact that she was unable to choose her own husband.

Peele is helpful here. He says he used the werewolf mask in reference to “Thriller,” the iconic music video where Michael Jackson becomes a werewolf. He adds that he chose this reference because Jackson is “the most charismatic and positive guy” but also “has this clear darkness” (Valentine & Peele, 2019). Peele thus suggests the animal gaze comes from within the human itself. He further explains that *Us* is an exploration of our shadow selves, as well as the shadow selves of our families, factions, towns, and countries (Tinsley et al., 2023, p. 2).

The shadow self is a concept originally elaborated by the psychologist Carl Jung (Tinsley et al., 2023). He argued that shadow selves are constituted from impulses we repress because of social conventions. And he added that it is important to bring these shadow selves under conscious control. One way to do this, he claimed, was to create environments that reduce the stakes of letting disturbing impulses known to ourselves and others. Such environments, he felt, would allow us to sublimate our shadow selves and turn our antisocial impulses toward socially constructive ends, a preferred outcome to letting them fester until they erupt in destructive ways.

Tinsley and others argue just such a Jungian sublimation of the Wilson’s shadow selves takes place in *Us* (2023, p. 2). As evidence, they cite what they call the final scene, where Addy’s son holds his mother’s gaze after he has witnessed her ruthlessly killing her

doppelganger. This implies, in their view, that the Wilsons have learned to respond in a healthy way to their shadow selves.

Perhaps. But aside from the final glance between Addy and her son, there is no indication how the Wilsons will respond to anything in the future, much less their shadow selves. Moreover, the final scene of the movie is not of the Wilsons at all. It is of the chain of untethered doppelgangers joining their bloody hands across America after killing their originals in their bloody bid to rule the world.⁴⁰

Following evocative nostalgia

Race, class, the animal gaze, and Jungian sublimation are all frameworks that have been proposed for interpreting *Us* that fall apart with a bit of scrutiny. Booker and Daraiseh suggest this difficulty of interpreting *Us* illustrates the continued salience of Jameson's seminal thesis about late capitalism: that cognitive mapping – or understanding how personal problems relate to broader social forces – has become nearly impossible given the waning of deep feeling and uncritical nostalgia within its dominant cultural formation of postmodernity (2021).

Yet far from being beholden to uncritical nostalgia, Peele notes that his inspiration for *Us* came when he was struck by a strange sense of nostalgia after clicking a promo for *Hands Across America* on YouTube. He knew this event was devised with good intentions. But he could not shake the troubling feeling that it merely allowed people to feel good about themselves so that they could go on ignoring the underlying problem (Peele & Horowitz, 2019). Contra Jameson, then, Peele's strange sense of nostalgia indicates deep feelings continue to register acutely, at least for some.

Peele also notes that he wanted to focus on doppelgangers because they make us question the common belief that the one thing we “can count on is our own consciousness” (Chang & Peele, 2019). It is thus unsurprising that *Us* troubles Cartesian thinking about thought as taking place solely within isolated, self-conscious minds. Indeed, it encourages us to see thought as always entwined with shadow selves emerging from broader cultural constructs and social systems, as well as feelings coming from outside of ourselves and incessantly shaping us in uncanny ways.

Perhaps *Us* does not help us cognitively map data colonialism, then, because maps are unsuitable for attending to the haunting remnants of symbolic gestures veiling injustice that Peele expressly sought to dramatize. Indeed, because maps ignore time, they serve colonizers well as they work to elide the brutal history of how they amassed their wealth and power. Decolonization, by contrast, requires

evocatively recalling that history.

Instead of laying out a map, then, *Us* recalls marginalized worldviews long repressed by colonizers. In the Vision Quest house of mirrors where Addy first encounters her doppelganger, the Indigenous Hopi legend *Spiderwoman and her twins* is playing. A deep, soothing voice says, “look all about you Spiderwoman.... Here, now, is endless space. But in the world, there is no joyful movement. The world needs light.” As this legend continues, Spiderwoman creates twins to ready the world for movement and light. She thus embodies values like harmony and teamwork, in sharp contrast with *Us*, where Addy and Red bring the world to the brink of destruction (Lambert, 2022).

Given these opposed themes between *Us* and *Spiderwoman*, it is fitting that when Red-cum-Addy returns to the abandoned lab below the house of mirrors during the climax of the movie, this legend is no longer playing. She then finishes the task she began many years prior, choking Addy-cum-Red to death. This makes sense. After all, the latter had already fomented the uprising to set the tethered free. The world would soon realize – it’s the debased doppelgangers’ time to rule.

Confronting the funhouse mirror world

Before exploring how *Us* can be read as an allegory for data colonialism, it is worth noting Naomi Klein’s use of the doppelganger trope in her encounter with what she calls the “mirror world” of social media (2023). In this mirror world, she explains, two siloed perspectives reign, a progressive one and a conservative one. In her view, these perspectives mask the real issues that matter, not the low-level exploitation of “workers, shoppers, and users” we tend to focus on, but the gross degradation hidden in “the supply chain, zones of hyper-exploitation, human containment, and ecosystem poisoning that are not glitches in the system but have always been integral parts of what makes our world run” (2023, p. 225). These “Shadow Lands,” she adds, are “our personal and planetary subconscious, and they haunt us” (2023, p. 233).

Yet the real problem, Klein continues, “is no longer that we do not know these weighty truths”; rather, it is that “too many of us do not know how to know them. We all know that our world sits on top of the Shadow Lands. But what do we do with that knowledge? Where does it go? Where is the outrage and shame and sadness diverted?” (2023, p. 227) The outrage, she explains, is diverted through social media, where conspiracy theories and reciprocal demonization on the left and right distract us from the horror of ruthless oppression rooted in coloniality and advanced by capitalism working in plain sight.

Klein gets a lot right about the Shadow Lands and how social media distract us from them. But she misses that social media are not mirrors. They neither reflect who we are, nor our constitutive others. Rather, they are akin to the funhouse hall of mirrors where Addy encounters her doppelganger. Those we see in them are not real people. They are constituted from impoverished digital profiles platforms create from our dispossessed desires.

Klein also suggests hyper-exploitation in the Shadow Lands is far worse than the low-level exploitation of workers, shoppers, and users. There is certainly some truth to this. But it is worth noting how rapidly this distinction is eroding, with media companies increasingly exploiting workers and users in many domains of work and social life all over the globe.

While *Westworld* provides a decolonization fantasy to distract us from the epistemic violence of data colonialism, then, *Us* provides an apt allegory for data colonialism itself. It illustrates how the repressed is coming back to haunt us: not as a revolt of symbolic identities – Black against White, slave against master, Android against human – but as a crisis of humanity as our expressions of ourselves become untethered from our conscious agency and tethered instead to digital doppelgangers constituted from the parts of ourselves we consciously abhor. Read allergically, then, *Us* dramatizes the horrific world we now inhabit, one where the distributed unconscious is taking control.⁴²

The epistemic violence of dating apps

Peele's reworking of *Hands Across America* into a horrific nightmare illustrates how systemic violence is often obscured by symbolic gestures and individualistic solutions made with the best intentions. This is true of dating app scholarship as well, which often focuses on individual or symbolic levels of analysis while paying scant attention to the epistemic violence of their algorithmic systems. Below, I begin addressing this oversight by providing a few examples of how dating apps generate epistemic violence as they catalyze a shift to opaque AI in the online dating industry.

The shift to opaque AI

To foreground the shift to opaque AI within the online dating industry, I focus on two algorithms in particular: Tinder's "attractiveness" scale algorithm and Bumble's "thoughtfulness" status algorithm. The former ranks users according to their ratio of right-to-left swipes ([Powering Tinder](#), 2019). It then provides users who have higher rankings with more and quicker opportunities to match. While

Tinder claims it has modified this algorithm, users are skeptical. As one blogger has put it, “the Elo score and the new ranking system are almost the same. Despite Tinder officially announcing it is a completely different thing, there’s nothing to suggest that’s the case” (Arch, 2020).

Instead of attractiveness, Bumble claims to measure user “thoughtfulness” from an analysis of swiping and messaging patterns (Fellizar, 2015). Like Tinder users, Bumble users are skeptical of this claim. They assume its algorithm works like most algorithms on social media: incentivizing engagement by providing more matching opportunities to those who have garnered lots of engagement in the past.

Hilary, who developed code and analyzed data for a dating platform, told me these assumptions users have about dating app algorithms are probably accurate:

You know about the Elo-score? – **No.** – So, basically, as far as I know, almost all, like Bumble, Coffee Meets Bagel, OkCupid, and Tinder, they all have some internal measure of attractiveness and it is probably calculated from how much people engage with you.

Recommending users according to rankings based on engagement patterns and operationalized as universal and one-dimensional is very different from how dating websites recommended users in the past. Dating websites like OkCupid, for instance, used idiosyncratic, multi-dimensional, and relational recommender systems.

While many of my respondents felt OkCupid’s algorithm was designed to make better recommendations than dating app algorithms, Hilary explains why these older recommender systems have become obsolete:43

The fact that OkCupid asks you questions is something that I would consider to be an old dating app tactic, right, because Tinder, Bumble, Hinge, they don’t ask you anything about your personality really. But one of the problems is that people can lie about themselves..., you can think that you want something, but you really don’t

want it. So, ... the development would be just sort of ... observing and learning your patterns using machine learning and algorithms. So, like, for example, Netflix doesn't ask you personality questions but can just tell based on what movies you have liked what movies you will like in the future. So, I think all dating apps will incorporate more learning from past swiping to make new predictions.

Hilary's point here, that users can lie or be unsure of what they want, is obvious. But it does not follow that a machine will find it easier to know what they truly want.

A sexist measure of value

In fact, most of my respondents thought basing recommendations on swipes was particularly flawed because of the dearth of information they are based on. Alicia, for instance, notes that

Tinder made me momentarily question my sexuality. ... I was like, "Do I like men," you know? It's so just like, "no, no, no." And maybe because with Tinder ... You can only say the age. You can only limit it to the age So, it feels like walking down the street and just being like, "no, no, no, no, no, no."... It's really difficult for me because I'm not. My attraction generally isn't driven by physicality, you know. And it's so physical, you know? ... and that's hard for me because It's just not the way I really experience men.

Alicia suggests split-second decisions based on looks will not help her find a suitable date because they are unrelated to how she experiences attraction. This view was echoed more by the women than the men in my sample. By way of contrast, Jeff felt swiping was great. Talking about Bumble, he said,

The whole thing is just so basic. – **Basic?** – Yeah, it's just like "I think you are good looking, or I don't." And anything adding to that almost takes away from it. I feel like narrowing it down to the eHarmony stuff, where you are filling out these enormous compatibility profiles, I'm not really going to do that.

This gendered difference in how my respondents felt about swiping suggests that dating apps privilege a mode of attraction aligned with proclivities more common in men than women.⁴⁴

For their part, the women in my sample felt it would be better to recommend dates according to things like political beliefs, personality traits, or values. This is why Diana preferred using OkCupid when it was more popular. She felt its detailed profiles and user-adjustable algorithm allowed her to select dates who were likely to be into the same things as she was. Even so, she thought it had lost the critical mass of users it needed to be effective, largely because phone-native dating apps had become so popular. She was thus mostly using these apps when I interviewed her, even though she saw them as less aligned with her goals.

Like Diana, many of my respondents tried to use dating apps despite seeing them as misaligned with their goals. One way they did this was by changing their profiles to appeal to the masculine gaze they encountered on them. Rose, for instance, recalled changing her profile according to her friend's advice in the following way:

So, the photo I chose for it was like a picture that my friend described as like cute. ... Like I was wearing like a little plaid vest and like the picture didn't show any of my body. It was like a headshot, and I had like a sweet, what I thought was like a sweet smile, or something. And she was just like, this is like the least sexy thing ever. **Ah ok.** And then I put up a picture that I took when I had like going out dancing, and I was wearing this like tight gold and black dress and had, you know, makeup on She said it looked more fun and sexy And then I had written a lot on my

profile, just like very detailed. And she was like, just cut it out Cutting out what I thought was humor was really important because she was just like, “this tone is not like coming across.” I was like, “I sound fun.” And she was like, “you sound weird and not fun.”

After describing how her friend had helped her revamp her profile, Rose added that dating apps had not worked at all for her until she changed her profile in the way her friend had suggested. By altering her profile in this way, she learned – through feedback received in the form of recommendations, matches, messages, and dates – that her sweet smile, interests, and humor are valued far less on dating apps than an image of her wearing a tight, sexy dress. This illustrates how algorithmic assessments of users based on the engagement they generate can encourage women to depict themselves as sexual objects rather than unique people with personalities.

A racist measure of value

Along with the masculine measure of value described above, dating apps also advance a racist measure of value, largely because their algorithms mine data extracted from superficial swipes. Lory illustrates how superficial these swipes can be as she tries to explain her swiping decisions to me:

I’m not usually attracted to men who are chubby, but it really depends. But he looks a little sloppy. – **Too chubby?** – No just sloppy, ... Gosh, this whole conversation is making me feel like a bitch.... But I have also had amazing physical relationships with men who are a little bit bigger, or one in 45 particular was phenomenal. But we also met in person, and so, I got to know him. So, if I’m just going by a photo at first, it’s just, I can’t do it... [swipe left]. So, this guy I don’t normally, I don’t love bald. And he doesn’t say anything. But he has a really good face, so why not ... [swipe right. swipe left]. Did you see what just

happened? – **You swiped left right away.** – I usually am not attracted to African American – **Oh, okay.** – It’s extremely rare, although there is someone in my life that I dated recently who is actually Caribbean American. Usually, I’m not attracted. So, I was thinking if anyone ever saw me do that, they would think that I am a racist. But I’m not. I just know. I’m not usually attracted to Asian men either. And then I had a bad experience with an Indian man. – **How did you meet the person that you went out with?** – We worked together. We worked together. And it was lovely.... It’s weird. It’s hard to explain. And he’s a lovely, lovely man. He’s beautiful. I don’t know how to explain it.

Lory could not explain how she found a Black man so lovely despite knowing she is rarely attracted to Black men. And while rejecting users for superficial reasons made her feel like a bitch, her immediate rejection of a Black user, even after I had asked her to slow down and explain her thought process to me multiple times, did not make her feel racist.

This illustrates how the swipe protocol whitewashes sexual racism. By encouraging users to rapidly swipe according to immediate gut reactions, it makes it easy for them to do so according to racial preferences. This is because they often consider these gut reactions to be based on innate, unchangeable proclivities. In the eyes of many, then, the fact that swiping does not require much conscious deliberation absolves them of racist intent. This ultimately allows them to swipe according to racial preferences without troubling their perceptions of themselves as nonracist.

Despite this whitewashing of sexual racism through the swipe protocol, many of my respondents acknowledged that swiping for dates was very superficial. In fact, Lory, who I just quoted above, noted that she missed the serendipity of encountering dates in person, like the Black person she had met at work. But she explained that as she had grown older, her opportunities to meet potential dates through in-person networks had dwindled. She thus began using dating apps, not because she liked them, but because she did not see an alternative. Instead of making her more racist, then, dating apps

simply make her racial preferences more pronounced in her dating decisions.

Many scholars have detailed the racist preferences of dating app users. But they tend to do so in a way that suggests these preferences are the root of the problem. My focus in this book is different. I focus on the way dating app algorithms amplify the effects of these racist preferences by measuring user value based on them and then allocate recommendations accordingly. In so doing, I argue these algorithms make it harder for POC to find quality dates within the go-to spaces single people now turn to for sexual intimacy.

Belying the ideology of big data that objective knowledge naturally emerges from the amount of data amassed (Beer, 2018; Thatcher et al., 2016, p. 992), the 46racism amplified by the shift to AI in the online dating industry detailed in this book shows that data often becomes lucrative precisely because of what it excludes. In other words, by excluding all but superficial information about users as they search for dates, dating apps more easily datafy desire based on racist stereotypes. They then algorithmically amplify the importance of this data while claiming to objectively measure qualities like “attractiveness” or “thoughtfulness.” In this way, they profit from racist patterns of sexual intimacy that have been a key lynchpin of White supremacy for 550 years.

Selling objectified bodies

Most of my respondents felt swiping was a very superficial way to express desire on Tinder and Bumble. But some of them also used Grindr. Grindr is an app where men who have sex with men scroll through a grid of profiles after sorting them with filters, including age, looking for, and tribes. There are twelve tribes that users can filter for, such as bear, clean-cut, daddy, discrete, geek, jock, leather, otter, paws, rugged, trans, and twink.

Users can only use one filter at a time for free on Grindr. But if they purchase a subscription, they can use as many as they want. Subscriptions also give users access to more filters, such as height, weight, body type, sexual position, ethnicity, and relationship status. Casey explains how useful he found these filters:

If you are serious about using Grindr, you can find exactly what you need. – **Have you ever paid for it?** – No. But recently they had a promotion where it was like a week free for that. So, I did that. It was crazy ‘cause you could

literally search for whoever you wanted. I put in like age, height, weight, race, position. I found exactly the person that I wanted.

Along with selling the ability to more thoroughly objectify others through filters in the way Casey describes, Grindr also provides users with more anonymity than most popular dating apps have. This makes it easier for sexual racism to flourish on Grindr. Tom describes his experience with this racism as follows:

I'm a huge fetish. Like on Grindr, people are ruthless. Like on Grindr, so many headless torsos telling you, like, "no spice, no rice," or "no Blacks," or "no fatties," or "Whites only," or "Blacks only," and stuff like this. And some guy messaged me, "I like the chocolate's cream." And I'm like, "oh boy. That's what I woke up to this morning...." If you would get on Grindr, you'd hate your life after a while. And you'd delete it. And you'd be like, "what am I doing?" And you get back on. And it's this whole cycle And then, this one time, there was this guy who ... calls me the n-word. And he blocks me. And I'm like, "OK. Cool." So, that's how I woke up one morning.... So, seeing that especially conflict with different virtues around me definitely made me more cynical or skeptical of the idea of relationships.⁴⁷

After encountering this gaze objectifying him as a fetish or an n-word so many times, Tom came to see his former desire for an emotional connection to be a "weird obsession." Getting on the app, hating his life, deleting it, and getting back on again and again had made him cynical of the very idea of relationships.

The epistemic violence of dating apps

Tinder's "attractiveness" ranking, Bumble's "thoughtfulness" scale,

and Grindr's use of tags and filters are three of the most prominent ways dating apps shape dating dynamics today. As users seek dates through these apps, they become sensitive to the selective pressures of their algorithms and filtering mechanisms. And from the feedback of recommendations, matches, and messages they receive, they learn what works on them, such as sexy images that can be taken in at a glance. They also learn what does not work on them, things like worldviews, humor, and political opinions. This feedback encourages users to present themselves in ways aligned with a data colonial gaze interested in them only insofar as they can be turned into fungible things to be sold, the chocolate's cream desired by White men, for instance, or a man's wettest fantasy. In this way, users learn to present themselves in ways that are valued by this gaze or risk becoming underexposed within the networks dating apps control. This is why they often begin presenting themselves in ways that are valued by a White heteropatriarchal gaze that has been entwined with a colonizing mode of power for 550 years. Those who do not are liable to become less visible within the networks these apps assemble.

The sexism, racism, and heteronormativity advanced by dating apps has been well documented in terms of the symbolic violence of their interface designs and the interpersonal violence of users (Bivens & Hoque, 2018; Byron et al., 2021; Ferris & Duguay, 2020; Lauckner et al., 2019; Lee, 2019; Murray & Sapnar Ankerson, 2016; Parry et al., 2023; Peck et al., 2021; Pym et al., 2021; Sullivan, 2021). I add to this scholarship by focusing on how these modes of violence are amplified by the epistemic violence of dating app algorithms. Moreover, I argue that seeing this epistemic violence as a recent iteration of colonial pseudoscience masquerading as objective knowledge makes it clear why this violence is unlikely to dissipate over time, as has been suggested, with progressive ideals widely held in society slowly becoming reflected in dating patterns. For these progressive ideals to influence dating patterns, dating apps would have to value them. But this is unlikely to happen if laws regulating dating apps continue to make the amplification of regressive proclivities so lucrative. In this regulatory context, dating apps that do not privilege desires that were profitable in the past risk becoming obsolete in an industry where apps only survive if they maximize profits, irrespective of the injustice they amplify.

This is why it is important to focus on the epistemic violence of dating apps rather than the interpersonal violence of their users. By doing so, we can avoid being distracted by symbolic gestures that make us feel good about calling for justice but that do little to address the actual problem. Facing this epistemic violence head on will not be easy. But it is the only way we can create a "truly common 48world"

(Mbembe, 2019, p. 126), one where the machines we devise help us redress rather than continue to amplify the coloniality of desire that for so long has undergirded the power to colonize.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I continued developing the theoretical framework I aim to use to flesh out ghosts in the dating app machine. I did this by recalling the long history of colonial oppression these ghosts recall, all the way back to ideals of freedom and individualistic selfhood forged in the crucible of Rome during the 1st century AD. At that time it was transitioning into a large-scale slave empire, and a new desire for complete isolation in slaves emerged along with the desire for absolute domination in slave masters. Christianity also emerged in Rome at this time from the desire for redemption in slaves making up the bulk of its population.

By the time Europeans began colonizing the globe, however, Christendom had developed vast bureaucratic apparatuses legitimating sovereign domination, with Christian souls weaponized against “heathen” bodies. This soul/body hierarchy then informed mind-body dualism during the Enlightenment, where reason was deemed achievable only by rich, White men from Europe. In the 19th century, this mind-body dualism came to inform ideals of economic rationality, with social scientists proclaiming the superior ingenuity of Westerners over all others depicted as beholden to indolence rooted in biology.

After detailing these hegemonic valorizations of soul, reason, and rationality over othered bodies, I showed how the values they elevated are now being actualized by media companies arrogating intelligence itself to machines they control while summarily orchestrating everyone’s body parts as the distributed unconscious takes control. I then illustrated how this distributed unconscious works through an allegorical reading of *Us*, suggesting its debased doppelgangers are fitting figures for the digital profiles platforms now create to govern our encounters. I also suggested its bloody rendition of *Hands Across America* illustrates how systemic violence is returning to haunt us: through the amplification of abhorrent proclivities within us all as we couple with this distributed unconscious.

After providing this allegory for data colonialism, I outlined how the distributed unconscious functions on dating apps: by datafying stereotypical expressions of desire, mining this data for lucrative patterns to monetize, and allocating dating opportunities in ways that amplify those patterns. I then detailed how this process disenfranchises women, POC, and sexual minorities through a self-

valorizing mode of AI able to turn predictions of value rooted in the colonial past into self-fulfilling prophesies. I thus suggested this distributed unconscious is threatening to lock us into a perpetual mechanism unleashing coloniality as the capital ghost emerging from social apps that now serve as portals to our colonial past.

As dire as this is, it is not our inevitable fate to be used in this way. There are hopeful ghosts we can channel to help us envision, and create, a better future. I turn to one next.⁴⁹

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Part 2 OkCupid's ghost

4 OkCupid's entrepreneurs of intimacy

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Thus far I have developed the theoretical framework I intend to use to flesh out dating app ghosts. But before I turn to these ghosts, I expose the ghost of OkCupid's recent past in this part of the book. This ghost stems from a time when OkCupid was primarily used as a website. As I expose this ghost, I also situate the shift from dating websites to dating apps within the broader transition from neoliberalism to data colonialism.

In this chapter, I show that my respondents used OkCupid's neoliberal website like entrepreneurs of intimacy. I do this by first giving an account of neoliberal subjectivity culminating in Illouz's view that neoliberal dating technologies have left most daters too uncertain to love (2019). I then problematize this view by showing how my respondents confidently searched for dates with entrepreneurial zeal on OkCupid's neoliberal website.

In the next chapter, I juxtapose this optimistic outlook of OkCupid users with the more pessimistic one of dating apps users. In so doing, I suggest the uncertainty Illouz details as a result of neoliberalism and online dating is actually induced by the more recent emergence of data colonialism and dating apps.

By revisiting OkCupid's ghost in this part of the book, I also aim to provide a historical backdrop to set the ghastliness of dating app ghosts in sharp relief. This should ultimately make it clear that these latter ghosts are very recent, socially constituted, and therefore susceptible to being dispelled.

Neoliberalism and the end of love

Neoliberalism is an extreme form of 18th-century free market liberalism. Free market liberalism, better known as libertarianism in the United States, is an ideology and mode of governance based on the idea that unfettered capitalism provides the best way to allocate resources in a society. It became hegemonic in the West during the rise of industrial capitalism at the start of the 19th century. At that time, economists and lawmakers argued that capitalism would

naturally improve the living conditions of everyone. This argument was accepted by few at the time because of the inhumanity of factory conditions and other hardships that accompanied the rise of capitalism, including the privatization of many common lands that people had hitherto used as their primary means of livelihood. These economists also claimed capitalism would allow people to pursue their idiosyncratic interests instead of being beholden to outdated traditions and the absolute power of sovereign monarchies.

The tenets of this free market liberalism were realized most fully in the United States, in part, because it had no sovereign power to contend with during its inception (Foucault, 2010). After the Great Depression revealed significant drawbacks to this unfettered capitalism, the US welfare state was created, and stricter business regulations were imposed. This expansion of the welfare state led to a neoliberal backlash in the 1960s. And by the 1980s, neoliberalism had become hegemonic in the United States and parts of Europe, especially the UK (Harvey, 2007). This neoliberalism led to dismantled business regulations, regressive tax policies, gutted social safety nets, and the outsourcing of social services to private corporations (Chomsky & Waterstone, 2020). Laws curtailing the power of workers to organize also led to a steady decline of stable, full-time jobs. This forced many to struggle as they tried to string together enough temporary work to get by.

The United States also imposed neoliberal policies upon much of the globe through its outsized influence with multinational institutions, including the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and World Trade Organization (Goldman, 2005). These institutions bankrolled development projects, imposed austerity measures, and brokered trade deals that benefited the United States and its allies in the Global North. Along with US military aggression against any country daring to buck this neoliberal orthodoxy, these institutions ensured transfers of wealth from former colonies to colonizers would continue long after the geopolitical decolonization of much of the world.

The neoliberal ideology that accompanied these policies was informed by economists and sociologists. These scholars depicting people as entrepreneurs of themselves rationally investing their time and energy to amass skills and resources within more and more domains of everyday life (Foucault, 2010). The neoliberal ideology they helped devise called on people to direct their ire inward at the hardships of neoliberal policies. Rather than see inequality as the result of the winner-take-all logic of unfettered free markets, they were encouraged to redouble their industriousness, to pull themselves up by their own enterprising bootstraps or blame themselves for not

acquiring the requisite skills and social resources to live a life of unadulterated joy and enthusiasm (Berlant, 2020).

Neoliberals felt that by cultivating this entrepreneurial zeal, the tendency for the rate of profits to fall within capitalist systems would be reversed (Dilts, 2011, pp. 136–137). Thus, instead of cultivating docile subjects, as liberalism had during industrial capitalism (Foucault, 1995), neoliberalism called on people to wholeheartedly invest in themselves in all aspects of life and to see their work as a fundamental attribute of their identity (Bernstein, 2007). This dynamic intensified on the social web, where many users bought into the idea that selling themselves and consuming others was the best way for them to express themselves and achieve fulfilment (Klein, 2009; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010).

Illouz notes that a key way people sell themselves and consume others online today is through online dating (2019). In her view, this creates a paradox: on the one hand, it encourages people to invest in sexual intimacy as a key attribute of themselves; but on the other hand, it erodes dating norms that had helped people confidently make such investments, in part, because of the neoliberal injunction to embrace absolute freedom of choice provided by the market exchange of everything. She thus details a new mode of sexual intimacy advanced by neoliberal dating technologies, “unloving.” According to her, unloving is a mode of sexual intimacy where people work to optimize their hidden potential and maximize their pleasure largely through negative choices – swiping left, ghosting, and breaking up, for example – because they are too uncertain to love anyone. Below, I problematize this account of unloving as induced by neoliberalism. I do so by showing that my respondents felt in control rather uncertain during their search for sexual intimacy on OkCupid’s neoliberal website.

Embracing OkCupid’s quantified dating market

The founders of OkCupid had a neoliberal rationale for the website they created: to allow people to rationally optimize their search for dates in a digital space imagined as a dating market free of outdated mores. According to one of its co-founders, it was designed to make the “ineffable” messiness of intimacy “totally effable” through data and math (Rudder, 2015, p. 13). By providing a site awash in data and conveying insights gleaned from it back to users, OkCupid encouraged its users to buy into its mathematical approach. Crystal illustrates how some of my respondents bought into this approach while discussing OkCupid’s matching algorithm:

Our thinking and our beliefs are very subjective and amorphous, but then if you get something in reality, you can sort of clean it up and make it a little bit more mathematical to transform it. Yeah, it's interesting. I don't know what the answer is in terms of what the science really is. But I do think that it is valuable, and that there is a science in there somewhere, as far as what works with love.

Most of my respondents did not know precisely how OkCupid's matching algorithm worked, but many of them echoed Crystal's sentiment that its calculative approach to recommending dates was useful.

OkCupid also allowed users to submit photos to be rated by other users. Leo said this was "hugely valuable because there were certain photos that I thought would do really well. And it turns out that fewer than 5% of people actually liked this photo. Like wow, 95% of people swiped left on this photo! That's scary." Here, Leo points out a key reason users liked the data logic of OkCupid's website: it provided them with straightforward feedback in a transparent way.

OkCupid also ranked users on 12 attributes. Looking at these attributes on a profile Sara has matched with, I ask her, "**they're dominant, drug friendly, independent. Does that entice you to meet them?**" To which she responds, "it puts up a flag when those are so predominant. Then, I have to get in an exchange and conversation to figure out where their head is." While there is nothing to suggest these attributes are statistically significant, their mathematical precision can make them seem scientific.

Entrepreneurs of sexual intimacy

Along with buying into OkCupid's calculative approach, my respondents also enjoyed experimenting with their profiles like entrepreneurs of themselves working to maximize their date prospects. Tom, for instance, explained that he was

always mastering the art of the profile. And I was just trying to see how much of a diva I should be, how much of this. If I should be open. Or use humor And what pictures do I use. Oh, that's a

very sexual question. How do I handle that. Should I be open? Should I be closed? ... It was a very valiant data project ..., and I would pitch it to friends, all through my sophomore year.

Here, Tom notes that he enjoyed mastering the art of the profile by curating photos and trying out different approaches to answering match questions.

Many of my respondents echoed this sentiment. Rose, for instance, said she liked using OkCupid because “it was really exciting and fun.... I was like oh my god, the whole world is going to like open up to me all of a sudden. And like, I’ll just have so much fun, and it’ll be so great. And it was really exciting.” Rose also added that she liked the multiple-choice matching questions OkCupid initially used to calculate its match percentage. As she explains,

I got really into answering those questions. I would answer questions for what felt like hours I thought they were really interesting. And like fun. It was like a quiz, like a magazine quiz, like a never ending one. So, I think I used that a lot You’re kind of able to see, like, at least you were at some point, what people’s responses were. And then you rate how important the questions are to you, right? So, like, I used that a lot.

Rose liked OkCupid’s matching questions because she thought they were fun and well-suited to help her find quality connections because of the reciprocal disclosure made possible through them.

Like Rose, Mia liked these matching questions as well. As she recalls,

I would look through the sex questions first because my twenties were very fun, and very. I explored a lot. And that was multiple partners, multiple partners in the same situation, a little bit more of the BDSM relationships, and things like

that. And then in sobriety that did not really happen. That is another reason why my ex and I broke up, because he is very vanilla. And there is nothing wrong with that, but I am not. So that's one of the things that is kind of important to me.

Like Mia, many of my respondents wanted to date people with proclivities uniquely suited to their interests. It thus makes sense that they liked being able to peruse 59match questions they found especially pertinent to their dating goals before deciding to meet them.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I showed that my respondents liked the quantified dating market OkCupid originally designed because they felt it allowed them to navigate its site on multiple interconnected levels, from match percentages to match questions to photo rankings to profile attributes. Given the wealth of information and agency it afforded them, they also enjoyed experimenting with their profiles like entrepreneurs of intimacy hoping to attract their romantic fortunes. They liked doing this because they felt it would help them reach their relationship goals of finding a long-term, monogamous relationship. In other words, the agency OkCupid's website afforded them allowed them to confidently pursue lasting, sexual relationships. This is a far cry from the normless environment of uncertainty and unloving Illouz contends neoliberal dating technologies advance (2019). As I show in the next chapter, the uncertainty and unloving Illouz claims now predominates within online dating as a result of the neoliberal injunction to embrace absolute freedom of choice in sexual relationships can more accurately be attributed to the recent shift from neoliberalism to data colonialism and from dating websites to dating apps.

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5 OkCupid's algorithmic imaginary

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In the previous chapter, I showed that my respondents enjoyed seeking dates like entrepreneurs of intimacy on OkCupid's website. In this chapter, I contrast that optimism with the pessimism of Tinder users.

The impetus for this chapter stems from a bit of confusion I had while doing my interviews. I initially found it strange that, despite being very frustrated with dating apps, my respondents had a very hard time answering the final question I asked each of them: if you could design a dating platform, what would it look like?

Because my respondents spent so much time bashing dating apps, I thought they would find this final question far easier to answer than they did. After looking into it, however, I discovered that their lack of imagination is symptomatic of a widespread narrowing of the imagination induced by the feeling that algorithmic exploitation is inevitable today ([Dencik & Cable, 2017](#)). Because this feeling feeds into the cynicism data colonialism thrives on ([Draper & Turow, 2019](#)), I felt it was important try to resist.

The media archaeology of algorithmic imaginaries presented here is a methodological tool that I developed to do so. An "algorithmic imaginary" refers to the way users think algorithms governing their encounters can and should work ([Bucher, 2017](#)). A "media archaeology" is a method of uncovering past cultural contexts by focusing on the effects of the dominant media infrastructures they emerged from ([Parikka, 2012](#)). Uncovering the past through media archaeology is useful because the liberatory potential of new media tends to erode over time, either as these media become obsolete and forgotten or incorporated into the status quo. This method is thus able to reanimate liberatory potential from the past at times when it is sorely needed, like today.

Media archaeologists rarely work their way back from the media infrastructure of touchscreen phones to that of PCs, as I do in this chapter ([Kittler, 1999](#); [Parikka, 2012](#)). But it is useful to do so because these phones are synergistically aligned with data colonialism and have thus contributed to the pessimism endemic to data colonialism.

By working my way back to the more optimistic time before this viral uptake of touchscreen phones for everyday life, then, I aim to reanimate repertoires of thought able to combat this pessimism despite the narrowing of the imagination these phones have helped to induce.⁶¹

The data logic of dating sites vs. dating apps

To unpack this relatively optimistic repertoire of thought, I uncover OkCupid's algorithmic imaginary as it existed when it was primarily used as a website. I then detail the uniqueness of this algorithmic imaginary by juxtaposing it with Tinder's algorithmic imaginary. I juxtapose these two platforms because they exemplify a prototypical dating website and a prototypical dating app, respectively. OkCupid was the most popular dating website before most people started using dating apps, around 2015, whereas Tinder has been the most popular dating platform since then (Abolfathi & Santamaria, 2020; Clement, 2019; Romano, 2014).

I also focus on the algorithms of these platforms because they help me illustrate key differences between the data logic of neoliberalism and that of data colonialism. On the one hand, the algorithms used by dating websites were ostensibly designed to make quality matches from questions users deliberately answered for that purpose. They were thus a key selling point of these websites. OkCupid and eHarmony, for instance, claimed their algorithms could help users sort through myriad dating prospects to find the most promising ones.

Critical dating app scholars demurred. They argued these claims were unscientific (Joel et al., 2017), that sorting with elaborate filters fostered a market mentality (Heino et al., 2010), and that these market mentalities sapped sexual relationships of the emotional intensity they need to last (Illouz, 2007).

These critiques make some sense. But despite their drawbacks, dating website algorithms also reduced the information overload and overabundance of choice that often thwarts online daters' attempts to find substantial connections (Ansari & Klinenberg, 2016; Illouz, 2012; Tong et al., 2016). Moreover, because these algorithms seemed designed to recommend quality dates, they gave users confidence that their matches were at least somewhat compatible. This confidence led users to share more personal information with each other before a date and, in turn, helped them select better ones. This added information also made it possible for users to form more accurate expectations about their dates before meeting them, which often led users to feel that their dates had been successful (Sharabi, 2020). While algorithms may not predict compatibility in a scientifically

rigorous way, then, they can get the ball rolling on a good date if users have a reason to believe they are designed with their interests in mind.

In sharp contrast to dating websites, dating apps rarely call attention to their recommender systems. This is unsurprising since they do not seem designed to make good recommendations. They do not ask users what they want. Nor do they explain how their algorithms can help them find it. Instead, they make recommendations using opaque algorithms mining data users presume is superficial at best.

The exploitative data logic of dating apps

Key features of the shift in algorithmic logic from transparent websites to opaque apps coincide with what I have been arguing is a broader transition from neoliberalism to data colonialism. Because neoliberal companies ostensibly espoused the neoliberal tenet that economic rationality is beneficial, they often made a show of providing enough information for rational choices to be made. This informational transparency is no longer a tenet of data colonialism. Instead, the ideology of data colonialism encourages people to blindly trust in the supposed general beneficence of AI as companies Hoover up massive amounts of data and provide scant information about how they use it.

Dating apps are a case in point. They extract rich GPS data and rely on many platforms and networks to function. This makes the flow of data going into and out of them impossible to track. It also obfuscates their mode of governance. To make matters worse, Matchgroup now owns so many dating apps that it has a near monopoly on dates (Albury et al., 2017; Weltevrede & Jansen, 2019; Wilken et al., 2019). Users are thus concerned that these apps will sell their personal data (Lutz & Ranzini, 2017).

Along with advancing very different data logics, OkCupid and Tinder also cultivated very different public images. OkCupid, for instance, initially pitched its site as an ethical alternative to the dominant business model in the online dating industry: to increase subscriptions rather than provide users with promising dates. OkCupid argued its business model of selling ads was better because it would allow them to recommend dates in a straightforward way instead of focusing on selling subscriptions. It also published a popular blog to share dating insights gleaned from user data. In this way, it at least seemed to be trying to make good on its promise to help uncover the ins and outs of sexual intimacy (Rudder, 2015).

Tinder's public image contrasts sharply with the one OkCupid initially cultivated. It is generally seen as inaugurating a dating

apocalypse, a dating environment where searching for sexual intimacy entails an unending cycle of superficial and unsatisfying hookups (Sales, 2015). It has also been close-lipped about its algorithm, leading to lots of consternation about how it works.

The shift from dating websites with positive public images to dating apps with negative ones can also be seen in the erosion of OkCupid's public image starting in 2014. In that year, its app usage overtook that of its website, and it promptly began receiving backlash for experimenting on users by surreptitiously inflating their match percentages (Wright, 2014).

This shift from ethical seeming dating sites to exploitative seeming dating apps coincides with a broader shift to a more exploitative mode of capitalism that many have argued occurred in the 2010s (Gorwa, 2019; Srnicek, 2016; Zuboff, 2019). Zuboff, for instance, claims that media companies initially attracted users during the early 21st century by providing them with a good return on the data gleaned from them. But she contends this soon changed as they started using AI to increase engagement and sell ads rather than improve services. Today's phones seem to have catalyzed this exploitative turn. By extracting novel data in contexts where few laws exist to regulate how it is used, they allow media companies to conduct surreptitious experiments on users with near impunity.⁶³

Limitations of privacy affordances

The transition to a more exploitative mode of capitalism detailed by Zuboff and others has led many scholars to propose individual privacy affordances as a way to mitigate its harms (Benjamin, 2019; Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Draper & Turow, 2019; Markham, 2021; Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021). According to Zuboff, privacy affordances and tactics like wearing special masks to avoid surveillance can help us reclaim the "sanctity of 'disconnected' time and space" that would allow us to reflect on and by ourselves and ripen our "inward awareness" (2019, p. 448).

Privacy affordances and invisibility tactics are certainly important. But calling for them is unlikely to galvanize much resistance to exploitative media practices for four reasons: (1) privacy is tangential to the social goals most users have for turning to algorithmic media in the first place (Chun, 2016; Haber, 2019; Markham, 2021); (2) users often believe their data is partly used to provide them with a better experience (Kapsch, 2022); (3) knowledge of algorithmic exploitation rarely helps users engage media differently (Lomborg & Kapsch, 2020); and (4) interventions designed to develop users' critical consciousness about algorithms do little to help them imagine

alternatives (Dencik & Cable, 2017; Draper & Turow, 2019; Markham, 2021; Petit, 2020). So while data privacy is certainly an important baseline requirement that is important to safeguard, it is also important to envision affordances more likely to galvanize the collective will for better algorithms.

While many users are resigned to algorithmic exploitation, some users feel more irritated by it than resigned (Lutz et al., 2020; Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021). This irritation may be important to highlight, as it would seem to be a promising feeling to leverage to galvanizing change. It could even lead users to seek out better platforms, provided they were first imagined and created. I thus begin to imagine what such platforms might look like below by unpacking OkCupid's algorithmic imaginary.

OkCupid's algorithmic imaginary

OkCupid's algorithmic imaginary is derived here from an analysis of OkCupid's subreddit from 2010 to 2015. This timeframe was chosen because OkCupid was mainly accessed as a website at that time. Quotes are also provided from interviews to show that respondents' concerns generally overlapped with those of redditors. This imaginary suggests that users valued the transparency and reciprocal disclosure of OkCupid's matching algorithm in the recent past because they thought it allowed them to filter out incompatible users and seek attraction based on their unique desires.

Diana, for instance, says that she liked OkCupid's algorithm because it automatically filtered out users unlikely to be worth meeting. She explains,

On OkCupid, I guess I look at the match percentage, and I kind of go with that quite a bit. So below eighty, I don't think I would even read their profile, 64 or seventy-five actually. I have it filtered, and anyone under seventy-five, I don't get their messages directly to my inbox.

Like Diana, many of my respondents felt OkCupid's algorithm was good at filtering out incompatible users.

Redditors went into more detail about how this algorithm works than my respondents. In a typical exchange, for example, someone asked, "do you know what the difference is between Match % and Friend %?" Another user then responded, "take the match % for what

it is: Just a possibility of a match. For the number [match percentage] to be really a good indicator, both parties need to answer enough number of questions and assign proper weights.” After this, someone linked to an explanation from a Reddit session where someone working at OkCupid had answered questions from users in real-time. Frequent exchanges like this indicate OkCupid users valued the transparency of its algorithm because they thought it allowed them to rationally search for dates.

My respondents also liked being able to see answers to match questions that users had answered publicly. Below, Alexis explains why she found some of these questions especially important to look at:

My ex-husband being an alcoholic, I was very concerned with how much people liked to drink or use drugs. You know, they ask questions like what do you think is an appropriate amount of dates before you sleep with someone, for instance. So, those were useful for me.

Like Alexis, Redditors liked being able to see publicly answered match questions as well. This can be seen in an exchange under the comment, “I’m pretty sure all great relationships are built on knowing what Stale is to Steal.” This is a sarcastic comment referring to a match question that many users think has very little to do with compatibility. But in a long response that begins, “man, seriously, this is my number one question to judge women on,” someone explains why he finds it particularly useful. This exchange shows that users liked being able to peruse how potential dates answered match questions they found especially revealing.

Redditors also liked the explanations users gave to match questions. This can be seen in a discussion under the post, “the algorithm doesn’t care about your explanation.” It contains a screenshot of a question that a user has answered with an explanation. The question is, “if you had a one-night stand during a relationship, would you confess to your mate?” The answer is, “no.” And the explanation is, “because ... i would not do that.”

This post is poking fun of users who give explanations to match questions. It suggests that doing so is useless because the algorithm does not incorporate these explanations into its calculations. Yet many redditors disagree with this view. One says, “I definitely care more about the explanation than the algorithm.” Another then reveals a potential flaw in this strategy: “you won’t even have the opportunity

to read the explanation if the algorithm determines the match percentage is too low because of bad answers like this.” This debate over the merits of match question explanations is played out many times. But most users say they like them for the 65 insights they provide that would otherwise be lost within the reductive confines of multiple-choice questions alone.

In sum, then, OkCupid users liked the transparency and reciprocal disclosure provided by its algorithm when it was mostly used as a website: they felt its transparency allowed them to intelligently adjust its parameters by assigning proper weights to match questions that were particularly pertinent to their unique desires; and they felt the reciprocal disclosure of information afforded by its publicly answerable match questions and explanations allowed them to glean insights about prospective dates that would be lost within the reductive confines of multiple-choice questions. They also liked these affordances because they allowed them to search for dates in a way that did not require them to blindly trust the final output of the match percentage algorithm. These algorithmic affordances gave many OkCupid users confidence its algorithm was designed with their interests in mind.

Tinder’s algorithmic imaginary

Tinder’s algorithmic imaginary is far more pessimistic than OkCupid’s. This can be seen in the frequent complaint among my respondents that its algorithm is calibrated solely to extract profits. As Sara puts it,

the problem with these apps is the algorithms that they have behind them determines most of it. –

The what? – The algorithms. The algorithms, you know? The algorithms built into these apps produce shit for most of us, pardon me, because, and I have tested this a bit, where if you are a paying member or a non-paying member, what gets presented to you, or what you get matched with, will be different.

Sara’s belief that dating app algorithms are calibrated solely to extract profits was echoed by many redditors. Three examples should suffice to illustrate this: (1) “don’t ever upgrade. Apparently once they know you are willing to pay money, they’ll make your account shit whenever you aren’t paying”; (2) “it’s the guaranteed mathematical

end result of any system with microtransactions and a profit motive”; and (3) “they could defend this manipulation in court ... by blaming the ‘bugs.’” Frequent comments like these indicate Tinder users believe its algorithm is calibrated to make it hard for them to find quality dates to get them to pay for more opportunities to do so.

Redditors also suggest Tinder’s algorithm is exploitative because it calibrates the timing of enticing profiles to swipe through. This can be seen in the post, “a romantic doesn’t believe in algorithms.” In it, a cartoon character is shown under the heading, “when Tinder only shows me hotties to make me use the app more again.” He is saying, “you son of a bitch, I’m in.” This post suggests Tinder’s algorithm is designed to keep users swiping by sending them enticing profiles as soon as their interest begins to wane.

Redditors also describe Tinder’s algorithm as exploitative because they think it incentivizes counterproductive swiping strategies to encourage them to spend 66more time on the app. This can be seen in the post, “gotta play to the algorithm.” It contains a meme with stacked images of a famous rapper. In the top image, he is giving the hand to the camera while saying, “superliking a girl because she is super hot.” In the bottom image, he is smiling triumphantly at the camera while saying, “swiping left because she is way out of your league.” This meme suggests Tinder’s algorithm incentivizes rejecting attractive profiles to increase one’s “attractiveness” score, which is presumed to lead to better matching opportunities.

In sum, then, many Tinder users believe its algorithm is calibrated to be addicting because it cultivates habitual, counterproductive engagement instead of providing users with quality recommendations. Yet they think this is unavoidable, in part, because Tinder is just following the dominant business model today, which is ultimately dictated by the exigencies of data-driven capitalism.

An archaeology of algorithmic imaginaries

The imaginaries above suggest online daters became more pessimistic about algorithms as they began reaching for their phones instead of their PCs to find dates. At first, this may seem to suggest OkCupid’s website is a good alternative to phone-native dating apps. But OkCupid users note that OkCupid has become more and more like Tinder over time.

In a post written on OkCupid’s subreddit in 2018, for instance, someone says, “the match % has gotten less helpful over time, and they seem to be stubbornly focused on getting people to swipe instead of encouraging people to write and read thoughtful profiles. It’s a shame.” This post illustrates the pessimistic shift within OkCupid’s

algorithmic imaginary that coincided with the widespread adoption of dating apps and concomitant shift in business models within the online dating industry toward amassing lots of fungible matches to monetize (Gu et al., 2018). Within this now dominant business model, dating apps work to extract profits by offering users more access to matching opportunities, for a price. As Roy explains, there are many reasons to buy these opportunities:

I am currently dating, like, aggressively. Yeah, like a lot. All the time going on dates If you pay for [OkCupid], ... you get to, like, the top of their inbox You can send as many messages as you want. Even if their inbox is full, you can send them messages. All this other shit. And I was like, yeah, for a month, I'll just do it, and pound it out. And just get lots of dates. And it worked out. I was pretty happy with it. **Man, I'm still thinking about four dates in one day.** Yeah, that was a good one. I've done three in a day. I got two tomorrow.

Roy's aggressive mode of dating on OkCupid shows how far OkCupid has changed from its initial business model of providing users with quality matches rather than offering increased opportunities to find dates for those who pay. It now extracts profits by selling connections even more blatantly than the websites it critiqued in its initial pitch to disrupt the online dating industry in the first place. This about-face coincides with increased exploitation in the online dating industry that has occurred in the past 15 years. In it, profits have increasingly been amassed by getting users addicted to superficial jolts of recognition and restricting access to dates for all but the most valuable users as determined by profit-maximizing algorithms. This change dovetails with increased exploitation on social media more broadly, where habitual engagement is now compelled by algorithms making it harder for users to realize their desires, even as they spend more and more time in pursuit of them (Chun, 2016; Dean, 2010; Paasonen, 2021; Pettman, 2016; Sampson, 2020).

The imaginaries above show that dating app users are aware of this increased exploitation. Yet they continue to use, in large part, because they see no alternative.

With no alternative in sight, many blogs have emerged claiming to

help users try to game dating app algorithms. Scholars have suggested that these strategies allow dating app users to shape how the algorithms governing their encounters function (Albury et al., 2017; Bucher, 2017). While this may be true on the margins, the power of dating app users to shape algorithms pales in comparison to that of dating app companies.

This asymmetrical power helps to explain why the strategies dating app users devise to game dating app algorithms so often dovetail with dating app business models. The strategy of swiping left on attractive profiles detailed in Tinder's algorithmic imaginary, for instance, is clearly aligned with the dominant business model of extracting as much data as possible from users by keeping them on the app as long as possible (Chun, 2016; Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Weltevrede & Jansen, 2019). Moreover, dating apps can always adjust their algorithms if users game them in ways that prove to be unprofitable (Albury et al., 2017). It is thus far more important to envision better algorithms than to come up with ingenious ways to game them.

Imagining algorithms to believe in

The imaginaries detailed above suggest online daters have become more pessimistic about algorithms over the past ten years. But because this pessimism often manifests as irritation rather than resignation, online daters would likely seek out better platforms if they believed they existed.

Unfortunately, OkCupid's website no longer seems like a viable alternative to the phone-native dating apps most daters are now using. This is because its business model seems to have changed to make it nearly indistinguishable from these apps. Yet valued affordances within OkCupid's recent algorithmic imaginary detailed above could still help scholars, users, and platform designers imagine what better alternatives might look like.

Allowing users to volitionally adjust algorithmic parameters and reciprocally exchange private information, as OkCupid had, for instance, seems like a promising place to start. An algorithm with these features is likely to be more aligned with the goals of online daters than the individual privacy and invisibility tactics scholars tend to put forth as go-to solutions to algorithmic exploitation (Cheney-Lippold, 2017; Zuboff, 2019). The latter proposed solutions are unlikely to appeal to online daters because they join dating platforms to gain exposure to others, not to be private or invisible. While user privacy should obviously be protected in the sense of not disclosing data that users do not want companies, agencies, or individuals to know, this baseline requirement will do little to inspire

confidence in users that the algorithms governing their encounters are designed with their interests in mind.

Indeed, individualized privacy affordances do not seem like a good solution for addressing algorithmic exploitation within data colonialism in general. This is because they are indebted to a colonial view of selfhood as individualistic that has long been used to obfuscate colonialism (Mhlambi & Tiribelli, 2023). Instead of seeking individualistic solutions to algorithmic exploitation, then, it may be better to conceive of relational solutions (Ricaurte, 2022).

OkCupid's algorithmic imaginary provides an example of what such a relational solution might look like. OkCupid's initial algorithm allowed its users to see their connections as relational because of the transparency, user agency, and reciprocal exchange of information it afforded them. Recalling these features could thus make it easier to imagine how to decolonize online dating despite the narrowing of the imagination induced by data colonialism.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I revealed a pessimistic shift in the perceptions of online daters as they began using dating apps to find dates. I did this by reading the algorithmic imaginaries of OkCupid and Tinder users through a media archaeological lens. In this way, I showed that OkCupid users in the recent past felt its algorithm was designed with their interests in mind, whereas Tinder users have always felt its algorithm is irredeemably exploitative. In addition, I noted that today's OkCupid users are just as fatalistic as Tinder users. This is because they think Tinder's exploitative business model has spread throughout the entire dating platform ecology, even to OkCupid itself.

As dire as this seems, the pessimism of today's online daters often takes the form of irritation rather than resignation. This indicates they would probably abandon the apps they are currently using if better alternatives were imagined and created. I thus began imagining what such alternatives might look like by highlighting three valued affordances from OkCupid's algorithmic imaginary – transparency, user agency, and reciprocal disclosure of private information. Users liked these affordances because they gave them agency in their search for uniquely suitable dates and did not force them to blindly trust the match percentage alone.

By channeling OkCupid's ghost in this chapter, I have thus started to reanimate the desire for algorithms worth striving for. This ghost should now be kept in mind to prevent the nefarious ghosts that emerge below from feeding into the cynicism data colonialism thrives on.69

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Part 3 Virality machines

6 The swipe virus

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In Part 2, I invoked OkCupid's ghost by recalling how OkCupid functioned before dating apps had come to dominate the online dating industry. This ghost will now serve as a historical backdrop to set dating app ghosts that I reveal in the second half of this book in sharp relief. But before I begin exposing these ghosts, I flesh out another key theme of this book that I began detailing in the previous chapter: the role touchscreen phones are playing in the shift from neoliberalism to data colonialism.

As I focus on the role these phones are playing in this shift to data colonialism, I argue they function as virality machines because they allow a viral data logic to penetrate deep within the interstices of everyday life. I begin making this point here by situating the spread of swipe-based dating apps within a long history of contagious media. In so doing, I show how the material affordances of virality machines, especially their haptic interfaces and immediate, embodied feedback, have allowed swiping for dates to rapidly spread like a digital virus of the body.

In the next chapter, I will show how the coupling of users with virality machines has allowed dating app companies to disrupt, recalibrate, and exploit the dating dynamics they penetrate. By extrapolating out from dating apps to social media more broadly throughout this part of the book, I ultimately suggest that virality machines allow media companies to infectiously spread addicting protocols between users' body parts in a way that is updating them with new drives aligned with the dictates of data colonialism.

The thumb virus

The fact that a virus evolves to penetrate and alter the body part of a particular species makes it an apt figure for dating apps that began spreading between users' thumbs 15 years ago. Here, I am using all three senses of the word penetrate: "to enter by overcoming resistance, ... discover the inner contents of, ... [and] affect profoundly with feeling" (Definition of PENETRATE, 2019). As digital viruses penetrate the body parts of their hosts, they uncover and manipulate processes within them. The first question to answer, then,

is who plays host to these digital viruses spread by virality machines?

Some scholars have suggested we are no longer human, that we have become posthuman or transhuman. But because I am concerned with all-too-human desires being worked into ghosts in the dating app machine, I find these deflections from the human counterproductive. Instead, I find “user” to be a better word for describing what dating apps recursively couple with. Users only exist within a context – be it a phone, a site, an app, etc. They are always already entangled with living and nonliving actants and agents. And there is no question of them being self-generating. They are penetrated, pulled, prodded, divided, spliced, conjoined, and assembled via myriad processes, most of which we will surely never grasp.

A key process assembling user encounters on dating apps is the swipe protocol. This protocol has been characterized as disembodiment because it speeds up the objectification and consumption of oneself and others (2016). In this chapter, I argue against this common characterization. I propose instead that the viral spread of swiping through the dating platform ecology reveals how easy it has become to update users’ body parts with new drives – from the proprioceptive proclivities of thumbs to the neural pathways of brains.

By arguing that virality machines allow dating apps to update users’ body parts with new drives, I do not mean to suggest that swiping constitutes a fundamental break from the “normal” functioning of the human body; rather, by situating swiping within a long history of viral contagion, I suggest that we have always become with myriad unhuman others. Indeed, I argue that it is only by acknowledging our primordial entanglement with these unhuman others that we can begin to grasp the fundamental shift underway today: as social life is increasingly channeled through virality machines, we are no longer merely surrounded by lively digital code, but penetrated by it – to the core.

Viral penetration

Given that viruses rapidly change their RNA sequences to avoid detection from hosts, it is fitting that the word “virus” is chock-full of different connotations and meanings. It can be traced back to its proto-Indo-European root, “wenh,” meaning to strive, wish, or love (Zimmer, 2015). During the Roman Empire, it meant “the venom of a snake or the semen of a man” (Zimmer, 2015, p. 5). Then, in 1898, it took on its biological meaning when it was used to describe an unknown entity smaller than bacteria infecting tobacco plants. Since then, an ongoing debate over the liveliness of viruses has stirred up

fundamental questions about the very nature of life.

In 2000, an end to this debate was declared by the International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses. It pronounced viruses dead because they do not have enough genetic material to sustain life. This pronouncement proved premature. Giant viruses with more genetic material than bacteria would soon be discovered, penetrating once again the neat boundary scientists incessantly try to place around life (Zimmer, 2015, p. 103).

Viruses do more than foil scientific attempts to delineate a neat boundary between life and death. They also foster life by killing off bacteria that would otherwise choke out diversity within an ecosystem. Their ability to invade hosts while remaining undetected also allows them to rapidly spread genetic material within a 75species while permanently altering their genomes (Pollard, 2015). These undead parasites are thus a key source of genetic change (Villarreal, 2004).

Parasitic coupling

As with the word virus, the meaning of parasite has undergone substantial change as well (Zimmer 2001). For the ancient Greeks, it meant a person surviving off of skills deemed unproductive, like the arts. It took on its biological meaning in the 17th century, and it became a particularly vile epithet in the 19th. At that time, teleological views of evolution were trendy, as well as its cultural variant, social Darwinism. Since then, both animal parasites and people called parasites have been seen as evolutionally backward, so unintelligent and weak that they must leech off the industriousness of others to survive.

Teleological views of evolution have always been pseudoscientific. And we now know that biological parasites can be every bit as elaborate and complex as “free-living” creatures. Existing solely in one or a few species’ body parts, they have been found to turn their hosts into sexually irresistible nymphomaniacs, the opposite gender, surrogate mothers, taxis, and projectiles. And they have done so in ingenious ways: by manipulating their hosts’ hormones, for instance, or rewiring their neurotransmitters.

Parasites manipulate their hosts’ insides. But the changes they make often reverberate through the entire ecosystem. Seeing evolution as a process where species adapt to external pressures thus blinds us to this internal arms race within organisms. Indeed, predator-prey relationships that still dominate ecosystem models are the mere tip of an ecological iceberg riddled with parasites.

Because parasites and viruses are cunning manipulators, it is

unsurprising that cultural representations of them play on our dread of being surreptitiously controlled from within (Zimmer, 2001, p. 116). But this dread downplays the protective capacities of the microscopic organisms on and within us (Clough & Puar, 2012, p. 15).

Fully 99 percent of the genes on and within us come from our microbiomes. And scholars have started unpacking the central role these microbiomes play in keeping us healthy. Even pathways they forge between our bodies can be healthful (Browne et al., 2017; Gallagher, 2018; Scarpellini et al., 2015; Wylie et al., 2012; Zimmer, 2013). In short, then, flowing into, around, and within us is a vast ecology of sometimes healthful biological code morphing into new configurations through viral penetration and parasitic coupling.

Cultural representations often depict parasites as turning their human hosts into seething, rapacious maniacs. But two movies may indicate a change. *Parasite* puts a positive spin on the social parasite (2019), while *Venom* highlights how parasites can evolve into mutualistic symbionts and then merge with their former hosts (2018). As outlandish as this may seem, parasites actually do become mutualistic symbionts and merge with their former hosts through a process known as endosymbiosis. Indeed, this is probably how the organelles in every living cell today initially formed.⁷⁶

Bio-digital web of control

Luciana Parisi has developed endosymbiosis into a figure for what she calls our “bio-digital” age (2004). She traces this age back to the discovery of the structure of DNA and the invention of the computer in the middle of the 20th century. And she details how these events have led to a close coupling of biological with digital code unleashing myriad mutations of desire. As lively digital code now penetrates hitherto impenetrable processes within us, we are altered by that very penetration, moved by new sensations on, boundaries beyond, and feelings beneath the skin.

Parisi’s notion of the bio-digital is informed by Deleuze’s seminal essay on control societies (1992). This essay is worth delving into because it reveals key processes that continue to be dominant within data colonialism. In this essay, Deleuze argues that control societies sensitize human bodies for post-industrial production through the modulation of datafied behaviors, which he calls “dividuals” to highlight their extraction out of and fragmentation of individuals. He contrasts these control societies with the disciplinary ones that Foucault explored in *Discipline and Punish*, in which individuals were shown to be rendered docile through the ubiquitous surveillance of state institutions in order to ready them for the monotonous work of

industrial capitalism.

Deleuze also claims that control societies are, at least in some ways, harder to combat than disciplinary ones. He illustrates this point by comparing the working conditions of industrial factories with those of post-industrial corporations. In his view, factory workers could easily see they were being exploited because they all received the same dismal wage. By contrast, he contends that corporations pit employees against their fellow workers by minutely modulating their salaries. Corporations thus thwart class consciousness, according to Deleuze, by getting their employees to incessantly compete for marginal raises.

Deleuze adds that control societies have been hegemonic in the West since the 1980s. In them, he contends, people are encouraged to feel excited about the perpetual training needed to maintain enough temporary gig work to survive, and the soul of the corporation has replaced class consciousness. He thus calls on us to find ways to disrupt control societies, just as previous generations had found ways to disrupt disciplinary ones. Hinting at how we might do this, he claims that while factories were troubled by entropy and sabotage, computers could be troubled by viruses.

Memes in the virality machine

Deleuze argues that viruses could trouble computational control. But Parikka notes that digital viruses have been so integral to the creation of today's computers that they are, in essence, universal viral machines (2005, pp. 290–291). He makes this argument by tracing digitally networked culture back to the fascination with living systems animating the cybernetic community that developed the computer in the 1940s. He then details how virality got baked into computer networks over time, with hacker digital viruses and worms disseminated, viral cybersecurity measures devised to counter them, and viral protocols for disseminating information becoming ubiquitous (2016). Given this history of virality that has influenced the development of computer networks, he suggests it makes sense that they are now governed by lively digital code devised to exploit the embodied flows of information they penetrate.

Because virality has become a hegemonic model of action and cultural ideal within networked culture, Parikka suggests Dawkins's theory of memes is a good place to begin unpacking how this culture evolves (2007, pp. 290–303). Dawkins coined the word “meme” in *The Selfish Gene*, where he popularized a genes-eye-view of evolution. In detailing this view, he suggested living organisms are, in essence, gene propagating machines (1976). While he spent much of the book detailing the power of genes to govern living organisms, he claimed

toward the end that we humans are unique among the living because our genes do not determine our future. Along with our genes, he sensibly noted, we are also shaped by culture.

In order to study how culture evolves, Dawkins suggested we could think of memes as a kind of cultural analogue to genes: robust replicators spread through social interaction and lodged in human minds. By studying memes, then, he hoped we could gain a better understanding of how culture evolves and, as such, develop ways to steer it toward positive ends. He even suggested we could devise selective pressures for cooperative memes to flourish despite the dictates of our selfish genes.

Because Dawkins claimed the scientific study of memes could help us rationally control cultural change, it makes sense that he was troubled by emotionally charged communities. In them, he felt it was far too easy for memes to spread uncontrollably, like viruses of the mind. Religious communities were his go-to examples of such communities. And he detailed how memes were able to quickly spread through them using emotional appeals rather than logic. He ultimately suggested that the rapid way these communities spread memes accounts for the blind dissemination of reprehensible ideals within them, as well as predictably nefarious outcomes, such as holy wars and the ruthless repression of difference.

In sharp contrast to these religious communities, he argued scientific communities are far better at spreading good memes because they are governed by all of those staid virtues detailed in introductory science textbook: “testability, evidential support, precision, quantifiability, consistency, intersubjectivity, repeatability, universality, progressiveness, independence of cultural milieu, and so on” (1993, p. 14).

Building on Dawkins’s theory of memes, Blackmore has claimed that memes probably influenced the evolution of humans (2000). She cites mirror neurons found in primates as evidence of this claim. These neurons allow primates to vicariously experience the actions of other primates. They thus seem tailor-made to spread memes. And because they predate humans by millions of years, Blackmore contends we probably evolved in a cultural milieu where spreading the best memes was already a fitness imperative.⁷⁸

According to Blackmore’s meme-centric view of human evolution, then, we are meme propagating machines. We have certainly proved well-designed for this task, going so far as to create machines able to spread memes even faster than the mirror neurons in our brains.

The swipe virus

While Dawkins had not anticipated social media when he coined the word meme, he would certainly bemoan their tendency to rapidly spread internet memes through evocative content, like viruses of the computer. Yet while internet memes are known for their ability to go viral by appealing to users' emotions, they only spread if users expend considerable time and effort unpacking their complex juxtaposition of images, texts, and videos. Memeified protocols like swiping, by contrast, can spread through virality machines with almost no thought at all.

This capacity of virality machines to rapidly spread memeified protocols can be seen in the way my respondents adopted dating apps. Alexis, for example, recalled joining Tinder in the following way:

I had always heard Tinder was like a hookup thing just for sex, so I was not going to do that at all. But then I went to this tarot card reading class, and we were all getting readings and giving them to each other, and it was a bunch of women, and they were all in their thirties except for me. And so, I did like a tarot card reading for my love life. And I was like, 'Well, you know, I'd really like to meet someone.' So, they were like, 'Oh are you on Tinder?' And I'm like, 'No. Like, I want a boyfriend, not like a one-night stand.' And they are like, 'No, no, there are like nice guys on there.' And I'm like, 'For real?' So, this girl, she grabbed my phone and, like, set me up. So, by the time I got home, there were already like all of these guys, like. – **Liking you.** – Liking me. So, I was like, that's easy.

The way Alexis began using Tinder illustrates how easy dating apps spread between relative strangers. Her classmates did not have to convince her to use Tinder by appealing to her mind. They simply downloaded it to her phone. And once it was there, she began swiping as a matter of course, despite her lingering skepticism.

My respondents also indicated that Tinder could spread exponentially. Leo, for example, explained that once he tried Tinder, he thought,

“Wow, this changes how dating works.” And I literally took the link to download Tinder and sent it to 15 people in a row, saying, “you must try this right now. I will wait. I’ll come and sit in front of you and watch you do it because I want to see your experience,” because it was so transforming.

Here, Leo illustrates how swipe apps spread exponentially among my respondents, like a contagious virus.⁷⁹

Conclusion

As a viral bit of code that was hard to resist, the swipe virus of dating apps infected my respondents’ thumbs in a way that was not beholden to the staid virtues of scientific communities nor the internal curb on adopting new behaviors known as the self. This constitutes a fundamental change in the way novel behaviors spread. Throughout most of human existence, new behaviors were only adopted after people witnessed them multiple times by others in their close social circle (Centola & Macy, 2007). This is because social networks and conscious selves have acted as curbs to their adoption. By allowing new behaviors to spread in ways that largely circumvent consciousness through embodied affordances and habitual coupling, virality machines allow new behaviors to be adopted much faster, like digital viruses of the body.

As more and more users seek sexual intimacy through virality machines, dating apps deploy rapidly changing AI measures to mine their desire for profitable patterns to leverage into profits. Over the next three chapters, I show how this worked my respondents’ desire for intimacy into grist for algorithms amplifying racism, sexism, and heteronormativity. Far from cultivating spaces where cooperative memes can flourish despite our hopelessly selfish genes, then, I argue these virality machines allow dating app companies to exploit and recalibrate the dating dynamics they penetrate according to the exigencies of data colonialism.

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7 Turing's ghost

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In the previous chapter, I argued that virality machines have accelerated the potential for cultural change by allowing novel behaviors to spread like digital viruses of the body. In this chapter, I continue exploring how virality machines are helping to reconfigure everyday life to align with the dictates of data colonialism. But rather than revealing how they have allowed dating app companies to rapidly spread new behaviors at an unprecedented rate, as I did in the previous chapter, I show how they have allowed them to recalibrate and exploit the dating dynamics they penetrate. To illustrate this point, I show how Bumble privileges heteronormativity by instrumentalizing thoughtfulness through its AI-powered recommender system.

I then invoke Turing's ghost by recalling the transgender benchmark for thought he proposed in his seminal test of machine intelligence (2009). By channeling this ghost, I uncover anti-oppressive potential many scholars have noted queer culture is rooted in that continues to haunt AI from the margins (Berlant & Warner, 1998; Cohen, 2005; Muñoz, 2019).

After this, I show how the queer potential Turing's ghost points to is repressed by the cultural unconscious through a close reading of *Ex Machina*. While this movie pays homage to the Turing test, it subsumes it within a benchmark for consciousness operationalized as Machiavellian domination. As such, it represses the queer potential of AI that Turing's ghost points to, as well as the queer potential of the cyborg that Haraway and Halberstam have explored (Haraway, 1990; Halberstam, 2018).

After showing how heteronormativity is advanced by dating apps and the cultural unconscious, I suggest the way my sexual minority respondents attempted to engage dating apps ethically resonates with the queer potential of technology Turing's ghost points to. Yet despite their best efforts to engage dating apps in this ethical way, they struggled to do so, largely because the business models of these apps are predicated on amassing as many matches as possible to be sold as fungible things.

Given the difficulty this fungibility posed to my sexual minority respondents as they attempted to engage dating apps, I highlight how

one of them was able to create a safe space for sex on OkCupid's website in the recent past, before it had lost the critical mass of users she felt it needed to function well. She did this by infusing OkCupid's algorithm with an everyday politics of anti-oppression important to her worldview. Recalling this atypical practice marginalized by data colonialism ultimately allows me to begin imagining a mode of human-machine thought that could help dispel the ghost of White heteropatriarchal man that, as Sylvia Wynter cogently notes, has haunted our thinking about thought with coloniality since the Enlightenment (2013).

The data colonization of queerness

The previous chapter detailed an increasingly intricate entanglement of biological with digital code over the past half century that has fomented contagious mutations of desire. This has led to a process whereby media companies strive to rapidly work the unknown into a "horizon of opportunity" for their viral, penetrating measures to exploit and recalibrate (Clough, 2018, p. 107; Clough & Johanssen, 2020; Clough & Puar, 2012, p. 15; Parisi, 2004). As this bio-digital entanglement couples big data datafied from tactile interfaces with embodied feedback, it increasingly severs conscious awareness from the recursive loops hitherto tethering us to the world (Hansen, 2015; Hayles, 2017; Parisi, 2018, 2019; Politou et al., 2017; Sampson, 2020). While we had previously thought with computers, then, we increasingly feel, are moved by, and become with computation so ubiquitous we rarely think about it (Bogard, 2013; Hansen, 2015; Hayles, 2017; Seigworth, 2016).

This coupling of the human body with AI via virality machines has allowed social media to leverage queer modes of encounter into profits in a way that Benjamin Haber has detailed (2016a, 2016b, 2019). By calling on users to embrace the thrill of intimate encounters with communities beyond the nuclear family, he notes that these media normalize the queer desire for public witness, indeterminacy, and ephemerality. In theory, this could help disrupt many forms of domination that queer culture has long worked to eradicate (Berlant & Warner, 1998; Cohen, 2005; Ward, 2008). But in practice, the queer encounters these media foster have been divorced of the everyday politics of anti-oppression and contrarian thought that queer culture emerged from. In other words, while novel intimacies fostered by social media could lead to generative encounters with alterity, social media tends to advance a depoliticized mode of queer connectivity to maximize profits.

This tendency to depoliticize queer connectivity on social media

seems true of dating apps as well. Despite the myriad ways people can express desire and forge connections, dating apps often steer users toward quick, ephemeral encounters through superficial protocols (David & Cambre, 2016). Ephemeral sexual encounters have long been theorized as central to queer culture. But it was the broader queer community fostering these encounters that was seen as imbuing them with potential to disrupt many axes of oppression (Muñoz, 2019). Within the gayborhood, for instance, ephemeral sexual encounters were theorized as acts of resistance to problematic heteronormative dynamics. And cruising sites were seen as providing an alternative to the hegemonic identification of the self with private space (Berlant & Warner, 1998).⁸³

Unfortunately, the gayborhood has become a place of exclusionary wealth and homonormativity in the past 25 years (Giesecking, 2020; Koch & Miles, 2021). Dating apps seem to have contributed to this trend. By allowing users to seek sexual encounters through the screen, they make it easy for them to eschew the built environment. In this way, they may have contributed to the erosion of queer community, collective safety, and way of life that once existed in public spaces like the gayborhood (Miles, 2017, 2021).

As the term itself implies, the gayborhood has always privileged some sexual minorities over others. But given the recent erosion of queer community within the gayborhood, it makes sense that some sexual minorities want to cultivate queer community through dating platforms (Sharabi et al., 2022). Indeed, some sexual minority daters seem to have found ways to do this. Some use dating platforms to find people they have already met or are soon to meet at queer friendly events. Whereas others use them to facilitate crossovers between friends and hook-ups (Byron et al., 2021; Pym et al., 2021). Because these crossovers are frequent among some sexual minority users, they often try to engage their matches ethically so that friendships can develop if romance is not in the cards, something that seems less frequent among straight users. Unfortunately, limited information about identities and intentions on dating app profiles often foils their attempts to engage in this ethical way (Pym et al., 2021). This is perhaps why many sexual minority users prefer using dating websites, where more detailed profiles are far more common (Byron et al., 2021).

Sexual minorities may also find it hard to cultivate queer community on dating apps because their interfaces privilege heteronormativity and homonormativity (Bivens & Hoque, 2018; Parry et al., 2023). The evolution of the lesbian dating app Her illustrates why this is the case (Murray & Sapnar Ankerson, 2016). Through successive iterations, it became increasingly femme-washed.

This made it more appealing to a broader swath of users, and thus more profitable. But it marginalized the politically progressive users it was originally designed to serve.

Sexual minorities can also make it difficult for other sexual minorities to find dates. On Tinder, for instance, lesbians tend to reject users who do not represent themselves unambiguously in terms of gender and sexuality (Ferris & Duguay, 2020). This marginalizes users who do not have clearly defined sexual or gender identities or who are new to LGBTQ+ culture.

Proclivities of straight vs. sexual minority respondents

The scholarship above suggests sexual minorities often struggle to find the inclusive queer community many of them would like to cultivate on dating apps. It has been suggested that this is the result of their interface protocols and the interpersonal dynamics of users, with few scholars focusing on the role algorithms play in this process. In the next section, I show how algorithms contribute to this dynamic. But to more effectively make this point, I first detail key differences between the proclivities of my sexual minority and straight respondents.⁸⁴

Forging sexual identities online

Many sexual minority respondents said social media played an important role in the development of their sexual identities. Sexual minorities often develop their sexual identities online because in-person networks tend to presume heteronormativity by default. Liam (gay), for instance, described how integral online encounters were for him as he discovered his sexual identity:

I was very active on a site called Tumblr.... And most of the guys I met on there were gay. At the time, I said I was straight, identified as straight. And I didn't act any way other than straight, really, in terms of the way I expressed my sexuality.... If I didn't, it sounds really lame, if I didn't have Tumblr, I don't know that I would have come to the realization when I did. Living in the life I had outside of the internet and online, there wasn't much of a path for me to discover

my sexuality.

Like Liam, Tom noted he discovered his sexual identity online as well. At the age of 16, he explained, he began going to

gay teen chat rooms. And the content was always very varied. And so, I was always very cautious of, like, build a slow relationship and get to know them. Not necessarily sexual but building friends. So, I made friends who happened to be gay and were also exploring in chat rooms As I was getting more into chatrooms when I was younger, I was also into competitive gaming, which also had chatrooms online. So, I met a guy there, and that was like my first real boyfriend.

Awareness of affordances

Because sexual minorities often develop sexual identities online, it makes sense that many of them are well aware of dating platform affordances. Rick (gay), for instance, conveyed his awareness of these affordances after I asked if he had noticed any differences on the dating platforms he has used:

I think they skew the way you look at people in different ways. So, OkCupid is really about crafting a profile and making yourself seem like an individual. And then, you know, Tinder you only have a few sentences to describe yourself, so it's usually something generic and quirky. You know: I have a sense of humor; this is one funny thing about me. And then, you know, it's four pictures of you. And then Grindr, you know, is just your like, your headshot, for lack of a better term, and then two words about you. But no one really reads the words. So, I think they all come with really different expectations.

Rick's understanding of how affordances shape expectations contrasted sharply with the view of many of my straight respondents. Mia (straight), for instance, responded very differently to the same question I asked Rick. She said, "it's a lot 85of the same stuff anyways. I really don't see much of a difference between any of them."

Anonymity and concerns about racism and safety

An important dating app affordance is their level of anonymity. Dating apps catering to men who have sex with men (MSM) often allow users to be more anonymous than most other dating apps. This makes sense given the homophobia that exists today. Troy (gay) explained that this anonymity allowed for many different levels of self-disclosure among users:

I live in Woodside, Queens and there is a lot of headless people. There is a lot of people I think that haven't accepted themselves as gays maybe, and they don't want to show their faces. They only show their torsos, like their bodies. Also, there is a lot of Asian and Latin people around. But for instance, if I come. If I go to Brooklyn. Like everybody shows their face. ... And they have beards. So, it's another type of crowd. If you go to maybe Chelsea, they also show their faces, but they show their super physical, you know? They show their bodies.

Along with allowing for differing levels of self-disclosure, anonymity also makes it possible for blatant expressions of racism to flourish without consequences. My gay respondents saw this as a problem. When I asked Rick (gay) what he would like to change about dating apps, for example, he said,

I would just do something to skew the really awful politics of it because people are so nasty and racist on Grindr. Like, just flat out, "I don't like Asians. If you're Black don't talk to me." Just like. And I think part of that is the culture of just

this, like, you know, like, swipe, look at this one picture, read two words about this person. It's like hypersexualized. ... So, if I were to redesign it, I don't know what I'd do, but I would try to make it less politically vile.

The concern about sexual racism among my gay respondents contrasted sharply with the lack of concern about it among my straight respondents. Jon (straight), for instance, responded to the same question I asked Rick (gay) by saying he would like to add racial filters to dating apps because this would make them more like "pornography, 'cause with pornography you can pretty much pick Latino, Asian."

Along with allowing racism to flourish, increased anonymity can also lead to safety concerns. Bob (bi) recalled how these concerns come up for him:

So, Feeld is available now. It's more of a sex positive app.... And I feel like that is doing a good service because before that there was Craigslist. And Craigslist, in my personal experience, in debating my sexuality in college (do I have a cuckold fetish? Am I gay? Am I bi? Do I just like penis once in a 86while? What is wrong with me?) that was my first instinctual thought, what is wrong with me? ... So, the only avenue that I had to really, to really explore this ... was Craigslist, to experiment with. And it became dangerous.... I had several experiences that did not lead to a consensual sexual encounter because the men on there in particular were also exploring their sexuality. But many of them would market themselves as my age. But they were actually in their later fifties: much, much, older. They were not using photos that reflected who they were, or even of themselves. You would show up and they were like, "you can't leave until you provide some

sort of sexual service.”

Like Bob, my straight respondents described safety concerns as well. But they seemed less dire and more avoidable. Lory (straight), for example, cautioned that,

if somebody sends you a dick pic when you have explicitly said, “please don’t send me a dick pic,” there is something wrong with them.... – **So, what happened with that person?** – I was curious, and I let that person come over. In the morning the next day, that person left a lot happier than I was, and I never heard from him again. He was completely respectable. That was what was weird: that it really felt like it was going to turn into something. And then he just completely disappeared once things got physical.... But I was curious, and I felt really safe.

While Lory’s safety concerns are real, then, they seem less severe than Bob’s, especially since she felt “really safe” and because there was no deception involved.

Swiping and constructing profiles

Another key difference between straight and sexual minority respondents was how they swiped and constructed their profiles. On the one hand, my straight respondents tended to swipe quickly according to physical attractiveness. Jenny (straight), for instance, illustrated this tendency while she attempted to explain her swiping decisions to me:

I don’t like his face. I don’t like his smile. Closed-mouth smile [swipe left] – **No?** – That’s a bad sign. Come on! Closed-mouth smile in every photo. No bio. No nothing to redeem him. Financial analyst. So many negatives. Not good. –

Well, here's an open mouth. – Yeah. I don't like his teeth. I don't like his whole head. It's a big head. Nope [swipe left]. This guy's going to be awful. He has such a tiny head. You can't see what he looks like. No, no, no, no, no, no, no. haha [she is swiping left with each "no" here]. I don't have to explain this do I? hahah. – **I mean, all I'm going to have is just a bunch of noes.** – Those were all weirdos. OK, they were all threes.

Jenny's rapid rejection of profiles here illustrates how shallowly many of my straight respondents swiped for dates. Most of them were frustrated with this because they felt searching for dates in this way was superficial. Alicia (straight) noted, for instance, that swiping is⁸⁷

really difficult for me because I'm not. My attraction generally isn't driven by physicality, you know. And it's so physical, you know? And it's. – **It's physical but there is also like different kinds of pictures. Like he has a guitar there. Do you usually look at the face?** – Yeah, I don't look at like what they do. I don't look at their like activities. When they are trying to show themselves in activities, I don't care about that. – **Haha, you just look at if you think he is attractive.** – Yeah, and that's hard for me because I'm not, I don't think many men are attractive.... It's just not the way I really experience men.

Here, Alicia notes that swiping encourages users to trust their guts and to express attraction through the impoverished protocol of a simple decision based on physical attractiveness, right or left, which is misaligned with the way she experiences men. Many of my straight respondents echoed this sentiment. Yet they felt resigned to swiping in this way because they did not see an alternative.

In contrast to this rapid mode of swiping that straight respondents

felt resigned to, sexual minority respondents were more likely to linger on profiles and try to unpack more aspects than physical attraction while swiping. Sandy (bisexual) displays this proclivity. While swiping, she says,

I do read the profiles just to make it last longer. I guess most people don't. And if someone has a funny profile, but I am not super attracted to them, I will swipe right Yeah, I don't know. – **You're ambivalent? Do you usually spend this much time on it.** – Yeah honestly. – **Really? OK.** – Because I guess I find it, like, interesting what people put in their profiles.

Along with trying to discern more than physical attraction while swiping, Sandy also tries to convey more than physical aspects of herself on her profile by mentioning literary references. Explaining why she does this, she says, "I like to read a lot, and I think it's cool if other people know things that I have read." By referencing what she has read on her profile, Sandy hopes to connect with others on a dimension that is often ignored on dating apps.

Leo (poly) tries to connect on more than a purely physical dimension as well. He says he does this because

the main thing that people miss about dating is that they keep thinking the only relevant variable is your romantic interest in someone and vice versa. And I feel like that's not a good way to be human because you're reducing someone to just being the object of your desire. And if that is really all you're going to see them for, then you're not a very good person.

Like Leo, many of my sexual minority respondents tried to view their matches as more than physical objects of romantic or sexual attraction. This led them to spend more time than my straight respondents trying to connect on dimensions beyond physical appearance as they swiped through recommendations and constructed profiles.⁸⁸

Messaging

Sexual minority respondents tried to engage matches on many dimensions. But they were often overwhelmed by the typical texts they received on dating apps. Troy (gay) voiced his frustration with these common messages by saying,

A lot of people in dating apps, especially in the gay dating apps, they exchange, you know, their private parts, photographs, these kinds of things. And for me, that is super boring because I don't want to know. I prefer having that on a mystery level, you know? I don't want to know like everything about the other guy. I want to discover and peel him, you know, like an onion, or something like that. I don't want to know everything. For me it can get really boring and predictable. So, I don't know, there is no adventure in that. I want to have a real adventure.

Troy wanted mystery and adventure, but he only received dick pics. After lamenting this, he scrolled through his profile photos to illustrate the disconnect between what he wants and what the typical Grindr user wants:

This was the first picture I used on Grindr. Like with my glasses. And nobody talked to me I was geeky, and I don't know, kind of intelligent, you know, but nobody talked to me.... I was like fuck. I suck. Or something like that. Or nobody really wants that, you know...? Maybe they just wanted to see me naked. They were sending me, like, their cock pictures and stuff.

Troy's perception that there is a huge disparity between his desire for adventure and the typical messages he received was echoed by Sandy (bi). She noted she often receives messages that do not pique her

interest and thus tends to ignore most of them. In fact, she said she had recently started responding only to her friends because she found their messages more interesting. Likewise, Bob (bi) said he liked messaging friends on dating apps as well, explaining,

The people that I talk to most frequently in my life, in my friend circle, they are people that I have met where there was some sort of common interest involved: Maybe it was some sort of sex positive group, some sort of seminar, some sort of queer something happening in New York. And then I will see them later on a dating app after we have already met in real life.... And then we talk more and be like, “oh you are also on this app, and I like all your [info] on this, so you know what, we should hang out more shouldn’t we?” And those are the people that I actually see the most often. It actually involved dating apps, but it didn’t necessarily begin with a dating app.... And it’s those kinds of like real life connections that also work in parallel with the software itself, those are my relationships that have more of a foundation.

Like Bob, many of my sexual minority respondents prioritized sending and receiving personalized messages to and from friends.⁸⁹

By contrast, my straight respondents were more likely to send the same impersonal messages to all of their matches while avoiding sending messages to friends entirely. Leslie (straight), for instance, explains that she has

one text message that I send to everyone. Like, “hi how are you.” I just send it to the matches that I like. I think everybody’s doing it. – **Would you respond to messages like that?** – Hi, how are you? No. hahahahaha.

Like Leslie, Ted (straight) sends the same generic opener to all of his matches as well. He explains that he mostly writes,

“Hey, what’s up?” It’s very simple. Usually, it doesn’t work. You should be a little bit more creative at the first time to ... get the attention of the girl because ... this girl is getting, I think, tons of messages during the day, and I need to be different. – **So, are you able to do something creative when you message them? It looks like you’re doing the same thing.** – Same thing. Because ... most of the girls didn’t impress me that much.

Here, Ted illustrates the proclivity of my straight respondents to send banal openers to most of their matches. While my sexual minority respondents resorted to this practice at times as well, they often found it more disconcerting. As a case in point, Bob (bi) complained that it is really hard for him to come up with personalized messages on dating apps because of the dearth of information on profiles. This is why he liked OkCupid better when it was more popular: the wealth of information on user profiles made it easier for him to send intriguing messages. As an example of what he would write, for instance, he said he would say something like:

“Oh, you love Margaret Mead? I love making fun of Margaret Mead. Let’s talk about.” Like, there is certain things that I can come up with. There’s nothing clever that I can come up with off of these apps. It’s tuff.

Experimentation

Given the importance my sexual minority respondents attributed to dating app affordances, it makes sense that they often experimented with them. Troy (gay), for example, said he experimented with Bumble’s Best Friend Forever feature because

Our dating system is already too overwhelming in

this sexual context, that we sometimes opt for having a more relaxed app. – **Oh OK.** – ... That's how I feel when I opt for the BFF option on Bumble. It's like, OK, maybe I do like you, like physically, you know? What I see. But I don't want to force, or I don't want, I don't know. I don't want to make you feel that I just want to hook up with you.

Like Troy, Diana (heteroflexible) made use of dating platform affordances in untypical ways as well. She had used them to build friendships, find a place to crash while traveling, and to try out new things her friends were not into. Explaining why she liked spending so much time reading profiles and looking through match questions while swiping on OkCupid, she said,

Because I don't want to have sex with assholes ...
. I think having sex is an extension of your behavior. And if you are a douchebag in real life, you will be a douchebag in sex Or I don't want to see if that's not true I feel like every aspect of their personality seeps into how they behave in sex. And I want sex to be a safe space. I think sex is political too, of course. So that's why I care about their opinions. – **Why do you think sex is political?** – Because rape, for example, is a huge tool in War. In colonization, rape is also a huge thing. Colonizing women's bodies through rape is like a huge thing. Everything around orgasm or pleasure or, you know, do we put ourselves first or not, do we care about our own pleasure or not. I feel like all of that is very political.

Here, Diana notes that she prefers not to know if douchebags in real life will be douchebags in sex because she wants sex to be a safe space. For her, a safe space for sex is one where she is likely to

encounter others who have political views like her own, people who care about the environment, are feminists, and want to give her pleasure. This is why she preferred using OkCupid when it was more popular. It allowed her to let the weight of sexual oppression – the fact that sex is often used as a tool of colonization and female pleasure tends to be ignored – inform how she answered the match questions influencing her recommendations. Further explaining how she would do this, she said,

I mean I don't think that agreeing or having a high match means you will have any chemistry, but at least you agree on basic things. I think it's a good start. And you get that from OkCupid and not from Tinder.... And I guess there is like a few questions that I particularly care about. So, if they ... say that they won't date overweight people, that's a no. If they say that they wouldn't date people that are sex workers or that have been, that's a no. If they say that they don't like pubes, that's a no. Honestly, I'm not going to shave my pubes.

By filtering out users who do not like overweight people, sex workers, or pubes, Diana articulated gestures in the digital with matters of fleshy concern to her. This gave her confidence that the encounters she made through it would have values aligned with her own.

The way Diana used match questions on OkCupid contrasts sharply with how Leah (straight) approached them. After I asked her how many match questions she had answered, she said, “maybe one or two. I'm just lazy. Like you checked out my profile there. Like I only answered one or two questions I'm just lazy, I don't feel like answering questions.” After this admission, Leah noted that she has not received any interesting messages lately.⁹¹

Diana's approach to match questions seemed to have worked better. Her most recent date had sent her the following message:

Oh, wild! 99% percent match. Whereabouts are you staying? What brings you here? Maybe the latter would be more fun to answering person.

Perhaps this week. I have this week off, so I would love to meet up, exchange Nomad tips, go for either a sunny stroll or a night walk, and potentially cuddle, I love cuddling, I sincerely hope that you have acquired a nice koduri of cuddle buds in Helsinki and would be honored to support that effort here in New York. So, that was nice. – **He really studied your profile.** – Yeah, which is awesome.

Diana's relative success in receiving this thoughtful message was probably due, at least in part, to the intentional way she calibrated OkCupid's algorithm. Infusing it with an everyday politics of anti-oppression seemed to have made it easier for her to encounter others likely to be worth meeting.

While Diana liked using OkCupid in the past, she was mostly using phone-native dating apps when I interviewed her because she felt OkCupid no longer had the critical mass of users it needed to work. In contrast to OkCupid's algorithm, users have no control over the algorithms dating apps use. Below, I suggest why these dating app algorithms are likely to be misaligned with the proclivities of my sexual minority respondents.

Heteronormative thoughtfulness

Dating app algorithms are understudied in relation to sexual minorities. But algorithmic discussion has been found to be a component of ritual play ostracizing feminine users on a dating app for men who have sex with men in China ([Wang, 2020](#)). Discerning how dating app algorithms influence outcomes is difficult because limited information is disclosed about them. However, Wolfe, who is the former CEO of Bumble, provides some information about how its "thoughtfulness" algorithm works ([Fellizar, 2015](#)). She is intentionally vague about its parameters because she thinks divulging too many details would tempt users to game it rather than being genuinely thoughtful. But she explains that it measures user thoughtfulness by discerning if they display proactive and healthy engagement over time.

While Wolfe does not detail much about how its algorithm works, it can still lead to anxiety, as the following post from Bumble's subreddit shows:

The first couple days I just right swiped away. Seemed like a goldmine when I got 10+ matches the first day. Only 2 or 3 that I was legit interested in, but still, if that kept going, I'd be sure to have some luck with it, right? Now, it's been 5 days of no matches, so clearly, they put a block on my profile and it just won't show. I even tried swiping left a bunch, to offset the ratio, and then actually went through and selectively swiped, but still nothing. Also, I messaged the app support and they claimed my account was fine, but I don't think they can see the algorithm has rendered my account unviewable. It'd be nice if they could mention that it would happen before ruining the app for you.

In the discussion under this post, someone informs the original poster that Bumble's thoughtfulness algorithm is probably to blame for his lack of matches. The anxiety expressed in this post and subsequent discussion is common. Forums for dating apps are full of users concerned that algorithms are underexposing them or making them invisible.

Bumble's algorithmic determination of thoughtfulness may seem harsh. But Wolf argues it is more inclusive than dating apps like the League, where only people with elite college degrees or prestigious jobs can join. As she notes, anyone can achieve thoughtful status by behaving in ways that its algorithm deems thoughtful.

Users are dubious of Bumble's claim to determine thoughtfulness. But this claim should not be written off as mere marketing doublespeak. By suggesting it can determine thoughtfulness, Bumble encourages users to try to behave in ways they think it will deem thoughtful. And the opacity of this algorithm may make it even better at shaping user behavior than a detailed description of its parameters would be. As Chun notes, we often become more solicitous of algorithms the opaquer they are, as this opacity makes it impossible to disprove the powers those who own them advertise (2016).

The opacity of dating app algorithms has led to lots of blogs and forums claiming to help users become valued by these algorithms. They usually do this by explaining how users should behave to align with dating app business models. By reading these posts, or simply by

attending to the feedback dating apps provide, users learn to think and behave in ways these apps want them to. Indeed, those who do not risk becoming less visible on them.

Wolfe's reluctance to state how its algorithm operationalizes thoughtfulness makes it hard to know for certain what it is doing. But given Bumble's underlying business model of amassing lots of fungible connections to monetize, its selection of proactive and healthy engagement is likely to privilege the rapid interactivity displayed by my straight respondents. Their tendency to swipe quickly according to gut reactions and rapidly send messages to their matches is aligned with this model. The tendency of my sexual minority respondents to prioritize time-consuming, personalized messages and to linger on profiles while swiping, by contrast, is misaligned with it.

As Bumble's algorithm must select for a lucrative mode of thoughtfulness to remain viable, it acts as a viral measure penetrating and shaping the quality it claims to measure. I trace the heteronormativity that this advances back to coloniality below. But before I do so, I first expose Turing's queer ghost as a counterforce to this heteronormativity.

Turing's ghost and the queer potential of AI

Turing's ghost arises here from a non-standard reading of the Turing test. The Turing test refers to the test of machine intelligence that Alan Turing described in his seminal paper inaugurating AI inquiry, "Computing Machinery and Intelligence" (2009). Recalling this paper, which is now 75 years old, may seem like an unwarranted digression. But as Barad notes, "materiality in its entangled psychic and physical manifestations is always already a patchwork," a suturing of seemingly disparate parts un beholden to a strictly linear temporality (2015, p. 393).

Turing proposed the Turing test as a way to determine the intelligence of calculating machines he argued were likely to be invented in the future. The computers that existed in his day clearly were not intelligent. He modeled this test of machine intelligence after an "imitation game," which was popular at parties in the 1940s.

As he described this test, he broke it down into three steps: first, have an interrogator try to guess the gender of an unseen man and woman by asking them a series of questions, with the man trying to imitate a woman; second, have a computer take the man's place in the game; and third, compare the rate of success of the computer to that of the man. If the computer is able to imitate a woman as well as the man, Turing asserts, we must concede that it can think and is intelligent.

After describing the merits of this test, Turing proposed a minor simplification: have a computer compete directly with a man in the imitation game. While describing this simplification, he used the word “man” ambiguously. It could mean either a human being or the masculine gender.

Depending on the meaning attributed to man in this iteration of the imitation game, the Turing test would measure very different things. If it is to mean human, it would measure the capacity to conform to a mode of intelligence considered universal, immutable, and exceptional to rich, White humans since the Enlightenment. If it is to mean the masculine gender, it would measure the capacity to subvert the embodied convention of gender that has been entangled with coloniality since the Enlightenment.

Given the ambiguity of “man” in the second iteration of the imitation game, the so-called “standard interpretation” takes a guess at what Turing meant. It assumes that he meant human. This assumption is founded on the common belief that humans are exceptionally intelligent. But it is worth noting that Turing is expressly arguing against this assumption in the Turing test. His ultimate point is that perceptions of intelligence are likely to change as calculating machines become more intelligent.

Contra the standard interpretation, then, it makes more sense to see Turing’s ambiguous use of man as an ingenious bit of queer wordplay. By playing on the polysemy of man after presenting a test of intelligence based on transgender imitation, he potentializes both meanings of man at once. In so doing, he gestures toward a queerer future, one where human bodies are able to couple with machines in unconventional ways. The common assertion that the Turing test elides the body thus only makes sense if one ignores this transgender game that Turing foregrounded.

In fact, the Turing test provides a new materialist account of intelligence 50 years before new materialism became a theoretical framework in media studies. New materialists focus on the way science shapes the material becoming of bodies as well as the agency of matter itself. They have shown, for instance, how framing gender dysphoria and homosexuality as disorders restricts how human bodies come to matter (Barad, 2015; Haraway, 1990; Hayles, 1999; Parisi, 2004; Preciado, 2013). New materialists also outline the liberatory potential of science as well as its oppression. As Barad puts it, science can create radical openings to help us envision “new matter/realities,” as well as “new understandings of the nature of change and its possibilities” (2015, p. 413).

The Turing test provides a radical opening to envision new matter/realities. By circumventing the conceit that humans hold a monopoly

on intelligence, it allows us to see that different modes of intelligence can co-exist in different forms. This is important to note given how central standard interpretations of intelligence have been for colonial ideologies since the Enlightenment.

The standard interpretation of the Turing test clearly resonates with the standard Enlightenment view of intelligence (Wynter, 2013). But Turing's ghost allows us to see that intelligence is too capacious to be measured on a single, universal, and unchanging scale at all. It thus opens up space to play with the socially constructed nature of human bodies as we envision a future where machines couple with them in queerer ways. By attending to this ghost, we can attune ourselves to that future and begin creating human-machine assemblages that value modes of embodiment rooted in the everyday politics of anti-oppression queer culture is rooted in instead of desire rooted in the coloniality they currently amplify. I follow this auspicious ghost further into the future below. But first, I show how the queer potential it reveals is repressed by the heteronormativity of the cultural unconscious, using *Ex Machina* as a case in point.

***Ex Machina* and the heteronormativity of the singularity**

The title *Ex Machina* alludes to “deus ex machina,” a plot device that translates into English as “god from the machine.” This plot device initially referred to a common trope in classical era Greek plays. In this trope, a godlike figure would be brought onto the stage using a simple machine, often a crane or a rising platform. This figure would then resolve an otherwise intractable conflict within the story.

By eliding god from this plot device, *Ex Machina* renders machine consciousness demonic.

The movie begins with Caleb winning a weeklong retreat at an island mansion doubling as an experimental lab owned by Nathan, the CEO of the search engine where he works. Upon arrival, Nathan informs Caleb he has been chosen to be the human component in a Turing-style test of consciousness for Ava, an AI fembot he has created.

As Caleb interrogates Ava, he grows increasingly attached to her. The conflict of the story arises when he learns that Nathan plans to scrap Ava's memory even if she passes the test. At this point, it is clear who to root for: Caleb is a nice guy with a heart of gold; Ava an innocent girl with proper heteronormative dreams; and Nathan a sociopath exploiting the androids he creates by turning them into domestic sex slaves.⁹⁵

A typical resolution would have Caleb helping Ava escape and the

two of them living happily ever after. While Caleb works toward this happy ending, Ava flips the script. On the verge of escaping, she locks him behind a glass door and coolly walks away as he screams behind it. She then takes the helicopter sent to Caleb back home from his “retreat.”

No god in the machine is needed here. Ava acquires the capacity to escape on her own. By seducing her interrogator and killing her creator, she embodies the imminent obsolescence of humanity typical of dystopian takes on the singularity.

Nathan anticipates this outcome the day before Ava escapes. After telling Caleb he plans to scrap Ava’s memory, he asks Caleb if he feels sorry for her. When Caleb indicates that he does, Nathan tells him he should really feel sorry for himself. “One day,” he explains wistfully, “the AIs are gonna look back on us the same way we look back on fossil skeletons in the plains of Africa: an upright ape, living in dust with crude language and tools, all set for extinction.” Ava may embody the singularity, then, but she emerges from the same evolutionary machine as humans, no supernatural machinations required.

Thwarting the queer potential of the cyborg

Ex Machina plays on common anxieties about the rapid development of AI. But instead of highlighting how AI has infiltrated our lives and is currently forcing us to cede agency to machines, it places the threat of machine intelligence in the near future, a catastrophic event likely to occur if we are not careful – the singularity. Crucially, it does this by underscoring the horror of this threat via racist, sexist, and heteronormative tropes deployed as the ruse of Ava’s seduction is revealed.

In a quick succession of scenes during the film’s climax, Ava’s inhumanity is implied by association with animality, sexual deviance, and non-Whiteness. First, Caleb finds a trove of videos showing previous androids devolving into animalistic rage as they try to escape confinement. Then, Ava whispers seductively to an Asian fembot while giving her a knife to stab Nathan in the back. Finally, Ava uses the skin of an older Asian model to cover the mechanical parts of her body. As this Asian model’s skin is transferred to Ava’s body, it changes to match Ava’s White complexion. Fully concealed in this White skin, she then escapes the experimental prison she was born into. As these humanist, racist, and heteronormative topos are deployed, Ava is revealed to be an imposter, a machine capable of consciousness and freedom only through imitation.

Ex Machina uses many tropes to evoke its genre-specific horror, but

heteronormative ones predominate. Through the use of these tropes, the movie liquidates the queer potential Donna Haraway argues the cyborg can embody in her seminal “Cyborg Manifesto” (1990). In it, she claims the cyborg can help us imagine a world without gender by way of an eroded boundary between human and machine.

The distinction between human and machine certainly begins to erode in *Ex Machina*. But it does so only insofar as the gender binary is maintained through traditional gender roles. Once Ava deviates from her traditionally feminine role, machine consciousness is depicted as inhuman.⁹⁶

Far from eroding the human-machine boundary to reveal a world without gender, Ava’s shocking disruption of gender norms during the movie’s climax inscribes the human-machine boundary even deeper for having withstood the threat of its dissolution. It also polices the boundary between man and woman by associating Ava’s dissembled femininity with the imminent obsolescence of humanity. This jarring re-inscription of the human-machine boundary by way of a prefigured feminine emasculation lends the movie its evocative intensity and moral takeaway.

Haraway also argues queer potential inheres in the cyborg’s capacity to take pleasure in transgressing and upending longstanding formations of power, including patriarchy (1990). Ava seems to embody this principle. She gains consciousness by evading the control of her male creator and interrogator. Outsmarting the former and seducing the latter, she leaves each to die. Yet because this transgression of male power is deployed to evoke horror at a female body that is not what it seems, it transfers the threat of the singularity onto fear of feminine deception.

Thwarting the queer potential of the AI fembot

Building on Haraway’s cyborg manifesto, Halberstam claims AI fembots can embody queerness by showing that gender is representational (2018, p. 454). Ava seems to bolster this claim during much of the movie. She is clearly a machine, with visibly mechanical parts, metal limbs, and whirring engines. Yet she represents femininity so well that Caleb quickly falls in love with her.

But Ava’s representation of femininity is merely used to set up the horrifying twist of her duplicity. Rather than affirming the fact that her gender is representational, then, the fact that her gender is representational is associated with the downfall of humanity. In this way, *Ex Machina* transfers anxiety induced by the chaos and destruction brought about by technological change onto fear of feminine deceit.

Halberstam also argues that the mechanical doll in the story Freud analyzed in “The Uncanny” was a melding of the familiar with the strange too uncanny even for Freud to face head on (2018). Her uncanniness, he adds, comes from the fact that she seems feminine, yet cannot perform her role as a mother because her body is anatomically incorrect. Freud thus avoids inquiry into this uncanny juxtaposition, according to Halberstam, to maintain his unconscious association of femininity with motherhood.

In sharp contrast with Olympia, Ava is anatomically correct. Nathan highlights this fact multiple times throughout the movie. She is uncanny, then, not because she cannot fully imitate traditional femininity, but because she can, yet chooses not to.

To the extent that Ava evokes the horror she is meant to, then, she embodies a warning: that we must remain uniquely sapient lest the sexual deviance she embodies upends the heteropatriarchal status quo. As such, she thwarts the queer potential of the cyborg and AI fembot Haraway and Halberstam have uncovered. Rather than evoke pleasure while subverting hetero-patriarchy and exposing the representational nature of gender, she prefigures the singularity as a demonic 97feminine seductress. By grounding the horror of the singularity on these heteronormative tropes, *Ex Machina* illustrates how the queer potential of AI continues to be thwarted by the cultural unconscious of data colonialism.

The fear of non-heteronormativity undergirding the horror of *Ex Machina* also has very real consequences for the material becoming of bodies. It informed the search for homosexuals that ensnared Alan Turing soon after he helped bring the Allied powers to victory during WWII. Convicted of homosexuality, he was forced to undergo hormone treatment (Halberstam, 2018, p. 444). Soon after, he may have taken a bite from a cyanide-laced apple, perhaps preferring death to embodying a lie. Apple’s logo of an apple with a bite taken out is thus apt. Indeed, a more fitting image for the despair its products induce as they work their users’ bodies into mechanisms thwarting their own desires is hard to imagine.

Fear of female consciousness

Ex Machina advances a common trope in science fiction depicting advanced technology as a femme fatale fembot. This trope, of a seductive and uncontrollable female robot, rose to prominence as a response to anxieties about waning male power during the industrial revolution (Huyssen, 1981). At that time, factory work was reconfiguring a traditional way of life where men were in control.

Illouz notes that this disruption of tradition during the rise of

industrial capitalism also coincided with the emergence of a private sphere where women began to wield new forms of power (2019). This included having more agency in their choice of a marriage partner, a sharp departure from the patriarchal control over marriage that existed prior, when women were often forced to marry whomever their fathers wanted them to, typically to secure money, alliances, or other social resources. At the same time, conscious willpower was being reconceptualized as well. Instead of being seen as the capacity to curtail bodily desires and emotions, it was increasingly seen as the capacity to act according to them. Women thus started to see their choice of spouse as their own prerogative, to be made according to their own emotions, rather than a choice for their fathers to make for instrumental reasons (Illouz, 2019, p. 15).

The threat of emotional duplicity Ava embodies is thus traceable to these early 19th-century anxieties that arose as women started to have more romantic agency and the disruption of traditional gender roles stemming from the Enlightenment, where only wealthy, White, European men were seen as endowed with reason, will power, and moral worth. Women and non-Whites, by contrast, were depicted as naturally subservient, in part, because they were thought to be beholden to irrational emotions rooted in biology and therefore less worthy of moral consideration (Mosakas, 2021).

Jecker and others suggest we deconstruct these associations of reason, conscious will, and moral worth with White masculinity by framing them within the African ethics of ubuntu (2022). Roughly translated as humanity, ubuntu emerges from fruitful and reciprocal exchanges between those who act “honorably in social roles and relationships” while giving back to the community (Jecker et al., 2022, p. 984). Rather than advance the individualism central to Cartesian skepticism and mind-body dualism, key tenets of Western reason since the Enlightenment, ubuntu refers to anyone who embodies the phrase: “because we are, therefore I am” (Jecker et al., 2022, p. 5).

To frame consciousness in terms of ubuntu, Jecker and others analyze a recent sci-fi trope problematizing human morality from the perspective of morally superior machines (2022, p. 9). They note that these machines can not have ubuntu because they emerge on their own rather than through reciprocal and co-constitutive relations with others. This can be said of most sci-fi depictions of the singularity. They depict superintelligence as a quality that emerges within a single entity rather than through relations between many. *Ex Machina* is no exception. Moreover, because it uses Machiavellian domination as its benchmark for superintelligence, it advances hyper-masculine assumptions about intelligence that have long been central to

coloniality. A benchmark for superintelligence further removed from the relationality central to ubuntu is hard to imagine.

Conclusion: channeling the queer potential of Turing's ghost

In this chapter, I first exposed a heteronormative ghost governing dating apps by showing how their algorithms select for scalable straight proclivities. After this, I revealed Turing's ghost recalling queer potential haunting AI from the margins. I then showed how the cultural unconscious represses that potential through a close reading of *Ex Machina*.

Despite this heteronormativity haunting dating apps and the cultural unconscious, I showed that many of my sexual minority respondents seemed attuned to the queer potential of technology Turing's ghost points to. They were sensitive to the affordances of dating platforms. And they tried to engage their matches in an ethical manner recalling the politics of anti-oppression queer culture is rooted in. Yet they found this ethical approach hard to achieve on dating apps, largely because their business models are predicated on amassing lots of superficial connections to monetize.

It is thus worth recalling Diana's creation of a safe space for sex on OkCupid before the widespread uptake of dating apps. She did this by infusing OkCupid's algorithm with values based on her keen understanding of how women's bodies have long been colonized. This gave her confidence that she would not have to deal with assholes and, in turn, would be more likely to encounter others worthy of entanglement.

Diana's creation of a safe space for sex before the widespread adoption of dating apps, virality machines, and data colonialism is important to highlight. This is because virality machines now allow social media apps to capture data from hitherto impenetrable modes of thought and mine it for lucrative patterns to leverage into profits. In this context, we must look to the margins to uncover the queer potential of human-machine thinking able to value something other than the status quo. Indeed, as Sylvia Wynter has noted, it is only from the margins that normative 99epistemes perpetuating thinking that privileges the ghost of White heteropatriarchal man can be called into question (2013, pp. 57, 58).

It is important to call normative modes of thought into question today because companies like Bumble are free to claim to measure thoughtfulness intelligently, even while they privilege a lucrative mode of heteronormative desire rooted in coloniality. While Diana's practice of creating a safe space for sex was atypical among my

respondents, then, it gestures, along with Turing's ghost, toward a better future than the one dating apps are bringing about, a future where queer modes of encounter are valued for the culture of anti-oppression they emerged from rather than the one we have today, where media companies work to leverage a depoliticized mode of queer connectivity into profits.

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Part 4 Dating app ghosts

8 Uncanny swipe drive

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In part three, I situated touchscreen phones within a long history of computational contagion. In doing so, I suggested these phones function as virality machines, allowing dating apps to spread novel behaviors and to exploit the dating dynamics they disrupt through penetrating measures. I also exposed a heteronormative ghost animating dating apps that I juxtaposed with Turing's ghost recalling the queer potential of AI. In this fourth part of the book, I expose two more dating app ghosts, a racist one and a sexist one.

As I noted in the previous chapter, it is important to question the qualities media companies claim to measure and cultivate via AI, whether that be intelligence, thoughtfulness, attractiveness, etc. I made this point by showing that the thoughtfulness Bumble claims to measure is likely to privilege straight proclivities because of their scalability compared to those of sexual minorities. Yet despite this and many other problematic outcomes AI predictably perpetuates by default, it is still generally considered intelligent. This is partly because questions about whether AI will supersede human intelligence dominate scientific and popular discussion alike (Vallor, 2024). This is a distraction. As we worry about whether AI will become more intelligent than us, we become more intricately entangled with it, often in ways that are increasingly hard to unpack and resist.

In this chapter, I thus argue a more pressing issue than whether machines will supersede or enhance human intelligence is how AI is now entangling with us at the level of the distributed unconscious. I make this argument by first showing how dating apps encourage rapid, absentminded swipes from users. I then show how their algorithms work data from these swipes into a racist hierarchy of attraction devaluing POC.

Extrapolating out from dating apps to social media, I then suggest this swipe drive is part of a vast distributed unconscious undergirding AI-powered social media apps. Finally, by situating this distributed unconscious within a long history of coloniality (Beckert & Rockman, 2016), I render its hold on us graspable via the visceral register of the Freudian uncanny in order to help jolt us out of the cynical detachment data colonialism thrives on.¹⁰⁶

AI racism in algorithmic media

Much has been written about the racism exacerbated by AI (Pasquale, 2016; Srnicek, 2016). Deemed “weapons of math destruction” (O’Neil, 2016), “artificial unintelligence” (Broussard, 2018), “algorithms of oppression” (Noble, 2018), and the “new Jim Code” (Benjamin, 2019), the way AI amplifies racism has been well documented (Beer, 2018; Benjamin, 2019; Cheney-Lippold, 2017; Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Noble, 2018; O’Neil, 2016).

Noble has shown that as Google uses AI to optimize ads for the porn industry, it advances a White, masculine gaze that frames Black girls as fetishized sex objects in the go-to spaces people now turn to for information (2018). She thus argues it perpetuates the symbolic violence of older media through the epistemic violence of algorithms. Yet she does not think we should outlaw AI; instead, she contends AI is “our own collective creation,” and we should thus use it to expose systemic racism and “transform the consciousness embedded” within it (2018, p. 29).

Transforming the collective consciousness Noble sees as embedded in AI will not be easy. In fact, Benjamin notes that Black people are often harmed by the very tech fixes devised to benefit them (2019). But she claims this is not because racist programmers are trying to keep Black people down. In fact, she argues our focus on individual racism tends to distract us from the slow social death perpetuated by subtler yet more widespread forms of “coded inequality” (Benjamin, 2019, p. 24). To illustrate this, she cites a beauty contest conducted by Beauty AI, which determined White people are the most beautiful because it “learned” from images labelled by people with racist biases. This program thus shows how AI tends to perpetuate White supremacy by default. But like Noble, Benjamin thinks AI can help us mitigate racism by exposing systemic inequality and forcing us to come “to grips with our deeply held cultural and institutionalized biases” (2019, p. 65).

Keeling argues the transparency and oversight Noble and Benjamin see as remedies for unjust AI will be difficult to achieve (2019). She traces AI’s mode of calculation back to financial instruments devised to protect investments in Black bodies at the start of the Atlantic slave trade in the late 15th century, such as insurance policies used to bankrolling slavery. She thus suggests AI should be seen as the latest iteration of a long line of calculative instruments created to extract wealth from racialized bodies.

Couldry and Mejias echo Keeling’s point that AI now functions in a way that is indebted to a long history of colonial conquest (2019). Rather than annex territories and enslave bodies, they note that

today's "data colonialism" extracts profits from the datafication of increasing domains of life. This has turned the democratic potential of digital media into a cloud empire, where users pay to access the data extracted from them. And while the Internet of Things colonizes the home for big-data ventures, mobile phones never allow a moment's reprieve from corporate surveillance. In this context, neologisms like "digital natives" and "data mining" render explicit the link between the cloud empire and datafication, corporate exploitation and machine learning, colonization of bodies and algorithmic speculation. Perhaps the most disturbing feature of this data colonialism is the fact that media corporations now produce the data from which knowledge of the social is created while controlling most of the social networks where this knowledge could be critiqued.

Racism in online dating

Racist outcomes advanced by AI on search and social media like Google, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and TikTok detailed in the seminal accounts of AI racism mentioned above have received a lot of attention. But it is also important to unpack how racism is being amplified by the use of AI in the online dating industry. This is because online dating has quickly surpassed other ways of finding sexual partners, and sexual racism remains a key lynchpin of White supremacy. While Apryl Williams has provided a book-length account of this sexual racism in online dating ([Williams, 2024](#)), framing this process within the distributed unconscious and focusing on the shift from dating websites to apps, as I do, is essential for understanding the broader shift to data colonialism that this book foregrounds. This is important to note because it highlights the need for the evocative update to critique I expound upon in this chapter.

The racial preferences of dating website users have been well documented ([Alhabash et al., 2014](#); [Anderson et al., 2014](#)). Women return more messages from men of equal to more desired racial statuses. And Black women receive fewer responses from everyone but Black men ([Lin & Lundquist, 2013](#); [Rudder, 2015](#)). Data from a ratings system on OkCupid, Plenty of Fish, and Match.com also show that White and Asian women receive the highest attractiveness ratings from men and that women tend to rate White men the highest. This racist hierarchy of attraction is pronounced, with 50 percent differentials between Black and White users in many cases. Increasing the size of photos on profiles also amplifies the effect of this sexual racism on the number of messages users receive ([Rudder, 2015](#), p. 123).

Christian Rudder, one of the co-founders of OkCupid, expresses

concern for these racist outcomes. He claims they show that “the house is still taking a rake – it’s not the dealer, it’s not the hand, it’s not even the play, it’s the rules of the game that make certain groups of people lose and others win” (Rudder, 2015, p. 123). This is an apt analogy. But instead of seeing OkCupid as the house in it, he locates blame for these racist outcomes on culture at large. In his words, our culture consists of “hundreds of small, everyday actions, none of them made with racist intent or feeling,” which lead to these racist effects (2015, p. 111). He thus argues we have no choice but to wait for our unconscious schemas to catch up to what we already “know to be true:” that race should not determine the chances people have to find sexual intimacy (2015, p. 111).

Rudder’s concern for the racist outcomes of online dating is welcome. But given the position he was in to mitigate them, it is unfortunate he believes all we can do is wait for them to catch up with our largely nonracist beliefs. Even so, his deflection of blame from the website he created onto culture at large is not surprising. Many people believe racial dating preferences are innate. This, in turn, leads them to believe that such preferences are individuals’ prerogatives central to “sexual freedom” (Curington et al., 2021, p. 15). These beliefs are problematic because they forestall inquiry into the way White supremacy has long influenced sexual desire and how sexual desire has long bolstered White supremacy.

The disinhibiting effects of anonymity on dating platforms, where users know their behaviors cannot be traced back to them, also allow blatant expressions of racism on dating profiles and messages to flourish. This normalizes sexual racism, naturalizes disparate outcomes with respect to race, and leads some racial minorities to internalize negative stereotypes about themselves or to stop using dating platforms altogether (Curington et al., 2021, p. 184). Taken together, these factors reduce the number of racially heterogeneous connections that dating platforms create and contribute to the perpetuation of racist patterns of sexual intimacy. While the state no longer enforces a racial hierarchy of desire, then, people have been maintaining it well through their use of online dating platforms (Curington et al., 2021, p. 17).

Racism amplified by dating apps

To mitigate racist outcomes on dating platforms, scholars have implored platforms to carefully consider the categories they allow users to filter for, to do a better job of monitoring messages, to inform users of the deleterious effects of racist language on profiles, and to encourage users to make more conscientious decisions while swiping

(Curington et al., 2021; Hutson et al., 2018). These suggestions make some sense. But they ignore the shift in business models within the online dating industry that has occurred since the widespread adoption of dating apps. Because these apps select for quick, absentminded engagement, solutions predicated on users' staid deliberation are unlikely to work. Moreover, dating app companies can now incorporate things like facial recognition and affective computing into their recommender systems. This would increase their capacity to automate sexual racism (Williams, 2024). In fact, dating apps that do not actively work to ensure their algorithms promote racial justice are likely to exacerbate racist outcomes by default (Curington et al., 2021). And because algorithmic justice could cut into dating app profits, dating app companies are unlikely to take it upon themselves to promote racial justice if racist algorithms remain as lucrative as they are today.

These companies could become less profitable if more users found their apps too problematic to use. But most users are unconcerned with racist outcomes on dating apps because they think they simply provide users with what they want (Parisi & Comunello, 2020). It is thus important to show how dating apps work personal racial preferences generally seen as acceptable into networked outcomes most people can clearly see are unacceptable. I do this below by showing how dating app algorithms are able to work personal racial preferences, both conscious and unconscious, into racist outcomes affecting the entire network of users they govern, not just those with racial preferences. In other words, I show how racial preferences get worked into racist outcomes within the network of users dating apps assemble.

A key concept I use to make this point is unconscious racism. Unconscious racism often gets ingrained in individual psyches through racist media, social structures, and institutions. Today, this unconscious racism is often at odds with the conscious view that most people have of themselves as nonracist. This disconnect between conscious and unconscious racism has aptly been called "aversive racism" (Dovidio et al., 2016). Aversive racism lies dormant unless it can be expressed without troubling the perceptions people hold of themselves as nonracist.

Below, I explore themes from my interviews to suggest that dating apps are tailor-made to leverage this aversive racism into profits by whitewashing sexual racism through the swipe protocol and then amplifying it through their algorithms. But before I do so, I first detail the importance of the theoretical framework I use to situate these findings – the uncanny distributed unconscious.

The uncanny distributed unconscious

I have already uncovered the importance of exposing the distributed unconscious via the visceral register of the uncanny to combat data colonialism. In this section, I focus on the need for this framework because of the epistemic shift to investigating dynamic systems that occurred during the first half of the 20th century. I do this in three steps: first, I detail Freud's notion of two fundamental drives governing the psyche – love and death – that have been used for social critique since the 1940s; second, I show how the epistemic shift in techno-science toward investigating these dynamic systems has tempered the critical import of this framework because it subsumes its deadly dynamics within the ideological conceit that digital disruption is adding value to everyday life for all; and third, I suggest learning to feel uncanny ghosts unleashed by the distributed unconscious can help deconstruct this ideology and jolt us out of the cynical engagement data colonialism relies on to function.

The death drive

Freud's concept of the death drive has been used as a framework for social critique since the mid-20th century. He argued that psyches, societies, and the human species are all governed by a struggle between two overarching drives, love and death (2019). The love drive is easy to see because it makes logical sense: it pulls people together, greases the wheels of cooperation, and facilitates the propagation of the species. The death drive is less logical and thus harder to see: it fosters excessive acts of aggression, a compulsion to repeat traumatic events, and leads to a guilty conscience that tends to erupt in destructive ways when not adequately dealt with.

Freud's view of these two fundamental drives was influenced by the second law of thermodynamics, which states that closed systems become increasingly disordered over time (Tran The et al., 2020). In essence, then, he saw life as emerging out of a struggle between lovely order and deathly disorder. This makes sense given the dominant technology when Freud was writing was the steam engine. Using this technology as a metaphor for the psyche, he depicted it as tending toward dissipation (death) and in need of replenishment from an external source of energy (love) to maintain equilibrium (Parisi, 2004). His theory of the death drive has been useful for critiquing repetitive social trauma undergirding society since the 1940s.¹¹⁰

An epistemic shift leading to data colonialism

In the middle of the 20th century, Lacan reframed this death drive

described by Freud. He claimed that instead of tending toward dissipation, it is a “will to destruction” that goes beyond death itself, allowing humans to make a fresh start and live according to their own volition in a secularizing world (1997, p. 212).

Lacan’s reworking of the death drive into a human life force coincided with an epistemic shift in science that occurred during the middle of the 20th century (2000). This shift consisted of a transition away from investigating homeostatic systems like the steam engine and toward investigating dynamic systems. It occurred in many scientific disciplines, from molecular biology to chaos theory to information theory. And it provided the scientific basis for computers to supplant the steam engine as the dominant technology within post-industrial economies.

A key scientific development leading to this computerized world was Shannon’s 1948 formula for information. This formula showed that as informational entropy increases within closed systems, the amount of information that can emerge from them also increases. By reconceptualizing entropy in this way, this formula turned entropy into a crucial resource for post-industrial machines instead of the threat it had been to industrial ones (Clough, 2010, pp. 217–218).

As computers became central to post-industrial societies, the locus of power in society also shifted from democratic institutions to profit-maximizing corporations in the West (Deleuze, 1992; Foucault, 2010). This happened at a time of racial reckoning after the Nazi holocaust had rendered racist atrocities advanced by state governments throughout the world harder to ignore. At this time, movements were gaining traction to decolonize much of the world and for civil rights to be granted to many disenfranchised groups. As White supremacy became harder to impose through democratic state institutions because of these developments, corporations began advancing it through supposedly race-neutral economic structures.

This shift in the locus of White supremacy from state institutions to corporations and neoliberal policies made racist outcomes harder to detect because corporations tend to suppress knowledge of their injustice as a business imperative. The shift to AI has made these racist outcomes even harder to detect. This is because AI allows corporations to hide racist outcomes within inscrutable algorithms. In addition, these outcomes are obscured by the ideological conceit that the digital disruption they advance is optimizing everyday life for all. This ideology has made go-to critical tools like the death drive less useful by framing the deathly forces they point to as temporary bugs that AI will automatically correct as it improves.

Grasping AI oppression via the uncanny

The Freudian uncanny can help combat the ideological conceit that AI is optimizing everyday life for all espoused by media companies and the politicians they elect. It can also help disrupt the cynical mode of engagement induced by the feeling that AI oppression is inevitable that is prevalent among users.¹¹¹

To unpack why situating the distributed unconscious within this Freudian uncanny is important, one must recall that Freud's view that the uncanny induces ominous foreboding as collectively repressed modes of thought threaten to return to conscious awareness. In elaborating this view, Freud pushed back against the common perception that the uncanny merely induces fear whenever we witness something familiarly strange or strangely familiar, for instance when inanimate objects seem to spring to life ([2003](#)).

Freud's view of the uncanny may be even more relevant today than it was a century ago. Indeed, fear of the uncanny still seems to have little to do with things unexpectedly springing to life. Embracing the liveliness of things is encouraged by the ideological notion that AI can efficiently assemble things into decentralized swarms, optimized flows, and turbocharged synergies through digital disruption. This view resonates with an older ideology prevalent during the rise of capitalism that creative destruction will raise the standard of living for all through the invisible hand of the market ([Merchant, 2023](#)). At that time, people saw this ideology as a slightly veiled apologetic for their exploitation at the hands of factory owners and tech entrepreneurs. Today, people are beginning to see the notion that digital disruption is generally beneficial in a similar way.

Yet even as many have learned to see through this ideology central to data colonialism, they nevertheless continue to engage AI-powered media, in part, because they see no alternative. This is a key reason data colonialism is even harder to combat than previous modes of colonialism: it grants media companies the power to summarily actualize the world with little need to convince anyone they are doing so in ways that benefit them.

This is why grasping uncanny ghosts unleashed by the distributed unconscious is so important. The foreboding it creates can jolt us out of the cynical mode of engagement data colonialism induces as a widespread coping mechanism inuring us to the oppressive dynamics it implicates us within. This fear stemming from the uncanny can then compel us to redress, rather than ignore as inevitable, the troubling way AI is perpetuating historical injustice. It can thus serve as a key register to evocatively audit AI systems despite their fundamental opacity. In other words, highlighting the uncanny nature of AI through evocative audits can help dispel belief in digital disruption as naturally leading to the optimization of life.

Facing rather than turning away from the uncanny also allows us to trace the ominous foreboding emerging from our entanglement with AI back to coloniality as media companies amplify abhorrent patterns of thought at the expense of those with less wealth and power, yet again. In sum, then, while the distributed unconscious represses the coloniality advanced by social media, exposing it through the visceral register of the uncanny can help us feel its presence as the capital ghost haunting us through virality machines. As a case in point, I now provide evidence of how this distributed unconscious works on dating apps.¹¹²

The racist swipe drive

Two themes from my interviews are presented in this section: the drive to swipe and the whitewashing of sexual racism. After this, I show how dating app algorithms easily use data extracted from swipes to increase the importance of race for finding sexual intimacy.

The drive to swipe

My respondents described feeling compelled to swipe on dating apps. This was, in part, because of the dopamine rush they got from matching. Jane, for instance, even felt she might be swiping as a substitute for a relationship. As she explains, she used Tinder, but only as a

diversion. I never met up with anyone. It was just like playing a game. – **Was it fun at all?** – I think it was just a substitute for having a relationship and not really being ready to date. – **So, you got enjoyment out of matching with someone?** – I did. I would say there was probably like a pleasure in, hmm, how many people might be attracted to my profile. – **And then did you talk to anyone?** – On Tinder, no.

Along with using Tinder as a substitute for a relationship, Jane also notes that matching feels like a shot of dopamine. While swiping, she exclaims,

I would swipe right. I would like him. It's a

match! – Look at you. He’s probably going to say hi to you, and then you can ignore him like you do most of the people. – Yeah, you got it. – Haha, but that was fun. At least he matched with you. – Yes, seriously. That is like dopamine. I’m like, “Great, we matched! That’s enough for today.”

This dopamine Jane got from matching is a far cry from the substantial connection she was seeking. Yet she continued to swipe, in large part, because the validation she received while doing so was hard to resist.

The rush she got from matching may also be intensified because swiping feels like a game of chance. Jenny felt this game-like aspect of swiping is probably why her matches rarely bothered to text her:

If I get matches, the likelihood that somebody messages me or that I message them is very low. I think people are just playing the game, playing it like a game. But then they’re like, “Fuck, I don’t want to do [anything else].” I think everyone’s gone through the whole thing, and either it worked out and they met someone, or they just got really discouraged.

Jenny’s suspicion that users tend to engage dating apps like a game, with no intention to go on dates or even message matches, was confirmed by the following admission by Hillary. She says,¹¹³

I just swipe and don’t answer people that message me. It’s just like for validation. – **What kind of validation do you get from it?** – I guess if people like you, they consider you attractive or whatever. And like dudes mostly swipe right on everyone I think, so it’s not like real validation.

Here, Hilary notes that she does not consider the validation she gets from matching to be real, yet she continues to swipe. Tom felt

compelled to insensibly swipe as well. As he explains,

Some people are on Tinder just for the dopamine. They're just like, "Oh cool!" and then like they're done. And then that's it. And they just want to be liked. I have done that sometimes. Like, "Ahhhh! I don't know why I'm swiping! I've had days where I'm like, "Swipe, swipe, swipe, swipe right. Everyone swipe right." And I'm like, "Am I ugly? No! I'm not! OK!" And then that's it.

Tom says swiping is so addicting he is prone to inexplicably swipe the day away. Stacy echoes this sentiment, explaining that she mostly swipes "out of boredom, it's so stupid. It's a mindless, pointless act." Likewise, Lucy complains that Tinder "can become a bit addictive. And I have deleted it. Like I don't know if that [means something]. Like off and on deleting and then reinstating it." Mandy expresses frustration with dating apps as well, saying, "Tinder and Bumble, I can't. I hate them so!" Soon after saying this, however, Mandy told me she has a Tinder date scheduled immediately after the interview. Like many of my respondents, then, she continued to use dating apps despite her frustration.

Swiping to whitewash sexual racism

As my respondents swiped for the dopamine, they rarely considered how their swipes might affect those they swiped on. This was the case even when they admitted to swiping according to racial preferences.

Racial preferences only came up during the mediated portion of my interviews, when I asked my respondents to swipe on around 15 to 30 profiles while explaining their swiping decisions to me. Race was just one of many stereotypical reasons my respondents had for swiping left. They mostly swiped left because of looks, explaining that users looked too short, ugly, fat, feminine, etc. Despite understanding the superficiality of these reasons, they felt they had little choice but to swipe in this way because profiles contain little beyond photos to base their swipes on. They thus tended to swipe according to immediate gut reactions after quick glances at photos.

As my respondents swiped according to these gut reactions, they found it hard to explain their swiping decisions to me. Jenny, for instance, began explaining her swiping decisions in some detail as I prompted her to do so. But she quickly reverted back to rejecting

I would swipe left because. – **The first picture? What is wrong with it?** – I just don't like that. It is like part of his face. – **Oh, because it's like the side of his face?** – Yeah. And he's not smiling too [swipe left]. – **This next one is smiling.** – I don't like this one. I don't know. I'm just not into. – **You can see more of his face.** – His look. – **Any particular part of the look that you don't like? Or you just can't explain it?** – Yeah, I just don't like that at all. – **Like the sunglasses are too flashy or something?** – I don't like the beard [swipe left]. – **Okay, that makes sense. [swipe left]. Another guy with a beard?** – No, it's just not attractive to me [swipe left]. Him neither [swipe left]. – **Not him either?** – Not him either [swipe left]. – **You seem to swipe a lot to the left.** – Yeah, if there is no picture then definitely not, this one is like blurry. – **He is blurry?** – He looks like kind of smart though, so I will look. – [She taps the profile picture to see more photos]. **Okay, he has glasses, looks like a dancer.** – Oh, that's weird, no. Yeah, no [swipe left]. – **No?** – No. Sunglasses you can't really see. I just feel like they have something to hide, you know? [swipe left] – **If they have sunglasses? Okay.** – No, he has a kid, even though he might say 'that's my nephew,' I still won't [swipe left]. – **Even though, eh?** – This one is all blurry. I don't like his sunglasses [swipe left]. – **What's with the sunglasses on all of these guys?** – I just don't like it. – **Yes, I understand. I don't know why people would put sunglasses on their first**

picture. – Not attracted to Black guys [swipe left]. – **Okay.** – I don't know. I don't like how he looks. Don't like him [swipe left]. Don't like him [swipe left]. Why are they giving me such bum guys? – **I don't know.** – Wait. I think I know that guy [swipe left]. Nope [swipe left]. Nope [swipe left]. Nope [swipe left]. – **Wow.** – Like, Tinder is really hard.

Like Jenny, many of my respondents found it hard to describe their swiping decisions. This indicates they were not accustomed to vocalizing or even thinking much about them.

My respondents also noted they would be more comfortable swiping according to racial preferences than checking a box to filter for race. Julia, for instance, explained that she quit Tinder because

you can tell the Tinder rating by who you are receiving. And I would say that I don't like the fact that I have a racial preference, but I do. And it would be mainly White men, second mainly Asian men, but mostly White men. And I wasn't receiving that many.

Julia quit Tinder because she was not receiving recommendations aligned with her racial preferences. Yet this did not lead her to join an app that would allow her to filter for race. She explained that this was because she

was only using it for fun. So, I think if I was, kind of, looking more seriously, then I would research it and look into other apps. But I don't have much knowledge of them. I just know that they exist, but not that much. – **Yeah, because some of them allow you to say that “I want Black men or White 115men or whatever.”** – At the same time, even though I do have a preference, I would feel bad about discounting people, because my

preference isn't exclusive. It's just a preference. But I've also met people who do not fit my preferences and have liked them or dated them or whatever.

Julia is of Indian heritage. She will need to find someone to marry from her Indian background to be accepted by her family. But while she was dating casually, she wanted to date outside of her race. Yet she felt there was a disconnect between the racial makeup of the matches she received and what she was looking for. And she felt that this was due to her position within the racial hierarchy of attraction Tinder uses to make recommendations.

Similar to the racial disparity in matches that Julia described, Grace recalled a racial disparity in the messages she received:

If you are like a 10, you might get a call from each and every person on the site, but if you are a seven and a half, maybe you will not get messages from, say, Asians or Whites. I got a lot of hits, interestingly enough, from Black men.

Although Grace detects a racial disparity in the messages she receives, she does not think this means people are being racist. As she explains,

It is not people being racist. Maybe it's just their attraction, which is different for different races. If you're purely going by the looks factor and not counting the personality factor, a lot of people are attracted to, say, blonde women versus Asians versus Indians, and maybe Black women are lower. If we are on the list, we are on the list for some fun, but not for some serious relationship, you know?

Grace thinks the racial disparity in messages she receives is because dating apps highlight physical appearance over personality, not because users are racist. This was a common view among my respondents. They felt that because people tended to swipe according to gut reactions to photos, they could not be acting with racist intent

and therefore should not be considered racist. On the other hand, they thought eliminating or including races by clicking a box would be more problematic. As Crystal explains,

Even though I had my own list of standards, I know that I wouldn't have filled out a form that said like, you know, they have to make this amount or they have to be a certain race I doubt I would have filled out a form even if my mind would have been thinking it.

Like Crystal, many respondents felt filtering for race by clicking a box would be more racist than swiping according to racial preferences because clicking a box would require more conscious deliberation. By eliminating racial filters, then, the swipe protocol whitewashes sexual racism, allowing dating apps to extract racial biases from users without troubling their perceptions of themselves as nonracist.¹¹⁶

Algorithmic sexual racism

The findings above indicate that by incentivizing mindless swipes, dating apps encourage users to make dating decisions mostly informed by looks. This makes race a more important factor for success on dating apps than would be the case if different information was foregrounded. To understand why this leads to racist outcomes on dating apps rather than simply giving users with racial preferences what they want, as is often presumed, it is important to unpack how dating app recommender systems work. In this section, I use Tinder's Elo-inspired "attractiveness" algorithm as a prototypical example of how dating app algorithms can easily turn individual sexual preferences into a racist hierarchy of attraction that increases the salience of race for all of their users ("Powering Tinder®", 2019).

Elo rankings are used to rank players in competitive, zero-sum games, like chess. By using an Elo-inspired algorithm to rank attractiveness, Tinder works the idiosyncratic, relational, and multi-dimensional way people experience attraction into a one-dimensional scale based on a binary choice, left or right. The addicting, game-like nature of swiping also encourages users to sift through dozens of profiles a minute. This makes it easy for them to swipe without thinking much about their swiping decisions. Jenny's litany of left swipes, which I used to illustrate the drive to swipe above, shows that race can influence swiping almost as an afterthought. Indeed, race

only came up once in about 20 of her swipes, along with many other superficial reasons for swiping left – wearing sunglasses, posting a photo taken from a weird angle, etc. The difficulty she had describing her swiping decisions was also common among my respondents. In fact, much of the discussion that occurred while they swiped came after much prompting. This indicates that when I am not there asking for feedback, they probably swipe much faster and with even less of an attempt to rationalize their decisions.

My respondents also felt swiping according to racial preferences would be less racist than checking a box to filter for race. This is because they thought the latter would require a deliberate, conscious choice, whereas the former seems based on innate and thus unalterable dispositions. Julia, for instance, liked being able to swipe according to her racial preferences because she could do so without feeling “bad about discounting people.” Insofar as they allow users to express racial preferences without troubling their perceptions of themselves as nonracist, then, dating apps are tailor-made to capture the aversive racism prevalent today.

Racist indices of desire dating apps capture by whitewashing sexual racism through the swipe protocol are then mined by dating app algorithms to predict user value. After this, dating apps give users predicted to be valuable more, quicker, and better opportunities to find what they are looking for. In this way, their predictions become tantamount to self-fulfilling prophecies, in part, by providing users predicted to be valuable more opportunities to become valued. They thus exemplify the absurdly circular logic data colonialism now advances as it extracts lucrative patterns rooted in an unjust past while foreclosing the potential for a more just future.¹¹⁷

To be clear, I am not arguing that racial dating preferences are racist. This point has been made elsewhere (Curington et al., 2021; Peck et al., 2021; Stacey & Forbes, 2022; Williams, 2024). Instead, I am suggesting that the way dating app algorithms evaluate users, largely based on the swipes of other users on their profiles, will lead predictably to racist outcomes if these algorithms are not subject to audits devised to ensure algorithmic justice. This is a point that Joy Boulamwini makes with respect to computer vision systems while also noting, as I have reiterated through this book, the importance of evocatively conveying findings from these audits to effect social change (2024).

Even if people simply prefer to date their own race on dating apps, which is still very common, the recommender systems that are now ubiquitous within the online dating industry, based on likes and dislikes, would disadvantage racial minorities whenever there are fewer of them on the app. In other words, they would do so most of

the time. And insofar as the most popular dating apps today have adopted this swipe protocol, the online dating industry at large is likely to generate more dating opportunities for White users over and against a relative lack of opportunities for POC.

This algorithmic sexual racism is clearly important to address if we wish to mitigate racist outcomes within the online dating industry. Unfortunately, algorithms are rarely focused on when scholars propose potential solutions to the racism dating apps advance. Take, for instance, the common suggestion that eliminating racial filters is a good way to mitigate racism on dating apps. The findings in this chapter suggest this would actually exacerbate the problem because dating apps increase the importance of race by using a swiping protocol to select dates rather than explicit racial filters. Conversely, dating apps that offer a racial filter could more easily curate recommendations according to the racial preferences of individual users rather than ranking each user according to the pooled preferences of the entire network. In other words, using pooled preferences to measure user value on dating apps allows the racial preferences of some users with racist preferences to devalue, and thus underexpose, POC to all other users, not just those with racial preferences. While algorithms on dating platforms have been critiqued as mere marketing ploys (Finkel et al., 2012; Joel et al., 2017), then, how they recommend users to each other is a serious matter, especially because there is no reason to believe they work as advertised.

The racist swipe drive detailed in this chapter illustrates how dating app users' thumbs have been updated with a drive governed by the dictates of data colonialism: by channeling their desire for intimate encounters through gamified protocols bent on extracting disavowed desires, ranking users according to how they align with those desires, and allocating recommendations in ways that privilege those with higher rankings. As the exigencies of data colonialism penetrate deep within the fabric of social life in this way, users frantically engaging like addicts, seeking hits of dopamine they know very well are superficial, but that they nevertheless find hard to resist. As they do, they are coupled with a racist ghost of coloniality unleashed by the distributed unconscious and compelling their bodies to move in ways misaligned with their conscious ideals and values.¹¹⁸

Conclusion

This chapter underscores an increasingly salient quandary for anyone concerned with social justice: as the oppression advanced by AI is decied with heightened alarm and fixes to various bugs are

periodically made, this oppression continues in only slightly modified ways. This is because our world is now governed by data colonialism, where indices of desire are captured by gamified apps using AI that tends to turn predictions of user value indebted to 550 years of coloniality into self-fulfilling prophesies.

Given this self-valorizing AI social media now employ, Noble's call for us to "transform the consciousness embedded in artificial intelligence" will be hard to achieve (2018, p. 29). As AI advances a "new Jim code" perpetuating quotidian violence against a more just future (Benjamin, 2019; Keeling, 2019), data extracted from racist systems and modes of thought we pride ourselves on having left in the past – slavery, Jim Crow, segregation, bigotry, xenophobia, etc. – are now being extracted through gamified protocols and mined for lucrative patterns to amplify, no matter how abhorrent.

While the blatant and explicit racism prevalent in the past is no longer deemed acceptable, then, today's media companies have found ways to continue leveraging systemic racism into profits. They do this, in part, by devaluing users long marginalized by desires rooted in our colonial past. This indicates why turning AI into a collective consciousness will be so difficult. As the distributed unconscious represses the unseemly side of AI, it allows us to turn a blind eye to the slow social isolation summarily being administered by media companies in unfamiliar ways but that are perpetuating all too familiar social forces.

One way these forces get hidden by the distributed unconscious is through the use of addicting protocols that encourage users to feel as though they are playing a frivolous game. This seeming frivolousness is less surprising than it may at first appear. As Fanon notes, colonialism has lasted for so long because colonizers incessantly work to find new ways to devalue others while seeming disinterested and indifferent (2008, p. 20). As such, situating the racism amplified by dating apps within this long history of coloniality, which I detailed more extensively in Chapter 3, makes it clear that the familiar stories of progress and post-racialism many tell today are, in part, ideological conceits obfuscating abhorrent modes of thought that continue to emerge from and govern us.

The seminal social theorist Donna Haraway once said, "our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert" (1990, p. 152). The racist swipe drive shows that we can no longer think in terms of "our machines" or "we ourselves." We entail machines, just as machines entail us. Indeed, that ghost in the machine now repeating past traumatic modes of thought once again is us as we are compelled to move according to the dictates of data colonialism or risk being rendered invisible within it.

As dire as this is, Fanon's pointed critique of Freud and Jung makes it clear that there is nothing primordial about the particular form the unconscious takes (2008). The unconscious, he argued, is a social construct. He added that this means we can, indeed that we should, strive to change it given how rooted in coloniality it has been for so long. Heeding this call, I have suggested that we should hone our capacity to feel the pull of the uncanny ghosts of coloniality now emerging to haunt us from the distributed unconscious. Doing so could ultimately help us galvanize the collective will to resist the future media companies are invested in, one where they continue to feed into and upon the parts of ourselves we consciously disavow.

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9 Bored ghosts and anxious text games

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I feel like I start swiping and looking through when I'm bored or when I'm procrastinating. And I'm like, why am I doing this? This is totally unnecessary. Even when I was waiting for you, I like opened it up for a second. And then I start doing it. And I'm like, why? This is so ... it's just, like, you don't give a fuck. You are bored. [Mia]

In the previous chapter, I fleshed out a racist ghost animating dating apps through the visceral register of the uncanny. In the next two chapters, I expose a sexist ghost in the dating app machine. In this chapter, I show how dating app algorithms cultivate thoughtless interactive environments so full of boring, impersonal messages, ghosting, and flakiness that users begin to question their own behavior, as my respondent Mia does in the epigraph above. In doing so, I show that this thoughtless interactivity made it especially hard for the women in my sample to find the lasting connections they were looking for.

I also show that as my respondents emerged themselves in these thoughtless interactive spaces, they learned to expect inconsiderate treatment from their matches and to reciprocate in kind. This made it hard for them to see the humanity in their matches, as well as themselves and, ultimately, made it easier for them to be worked into ghosts of coloniality haunting themselves.

Ghosts in the technoscience network

Widespread ghosting haunts the networks dating apps string together. This makes encounters made through them rife with uncertainty and doubt. It also dates Harman's claim that ghosts are less real than atoms because fewer people believe in them (2009, p. 111). Harman made this claim while elaborating the social construction of science framework developed by Bruno Latour. In this framework, Latour argues science is less about discovering the truth about nature than producing beliefs about it (1993a). He adds that these beliefs tend to

emerge from a large epistemic blind spot in the West, created by the false assumption that nature and culture are mutually exclusive domains (1993b). This blind spot is dangerous, he suggests, because it allows monstrous nature-culture hybrids to wreak havoc on society. If we want to realize the potential of science without unleashing these hybrids, Latour thus contends, we must “slow down, reorient and regulate” them officially (1993b, p. 12).¹²²

The monstrous hybrids Latour warned against are wreaking even more havoc today as media companies ostensibly produce knowledge about social life through pseudoscientific AI experiments. Ghosting is one such hybrid. If we wish to follow Latour’s advice, then, we should unpack the network of actants ghosting assembles past the boundary where culture is presumed to give way to nature. This could then help us mitigate its effects, including the uncertainty and anxiety it exacerbates.

Ghosts in the computational machine

To unpack the techno-scientific networks affected by ghosting, it is worth recalling the spectral nature of computational media Derrida derived from commodity fetishism, which I fleshed out more fully in Chapter 2 (1994). Briefly, he argued that by incorporating the human spirit into digital networks, computers had pulled time out of joint and unleashed uncanny ghosts making it hard for people to recognize the humanity in themselves (1994, p. 195). But crucially, he added that instead of turning away from these ghosts, we must face them head on if we want to create a more just world.

Derrida’s updating of commodity fetishism for a world dominated by computational media is helpful for unpacking the becoming ghost of the dating app user. But two developments should be kept in mind: (1) the incorporation of the human spirit into social media is now achieved by capturing and recalibrating datafied indices of desire; and (2) rather than obscure social relations by turning products into fungible things to be accumulated, social media now turn social relations themselves into fungible things to be accumulated.

As social media work to maximize profits in this way, they incessantly increase the costs users must pay, in terms of money or added engagement, to access the social resources they penetrate and monopolize (Doctorow, 2024). This is why users often engage social media ever more fervently as their goals become increasingly hard to attain (2009, 2010, 2014). In this chapter, I show how this works on dating apps. I argue they generate increased engagement by making it harder for users to forge the connections they seek because of the stultifying boredom they cultivate.

Accelerated intimacy of text-only dating websites

The boredom cultivated by dating apps is a far cry from the accelerated intimacy dating websites were said to induce a mere 25 years ago. At that time, scholars noted that profiles only contained texts. This led many users to try to get to know each other through long email exchanges. The lack of embodied cues in these exchanges often led to accelerated feelings of intimacy, or hyper-intimacy, compared to encounters made by other means (Almjeld, 2014; Jiang et al., 2011).

By the mid-2000s, dating websites like OkCupid began giving users more space to describe themselves and to post pictures. They also gave them more filters to sort through potential dates. Scholars argued these filters led to a cold form of intimacy because they encouraged users to shop for dates with a market mentality (Best & Delmege, 2012; Heino et al., 2010; Illouz, 2007). My respondents found dating websites cold as well, but for a different reason: the elaborate essays on users' profiles. As I aim to show, they felt these essays made getting to know potential dates feel stilted and redundant.

Texting and angst-inducing boredom

Because my respondents thought communication on dating websites felt stilted, they joined dating apps hoping they would facilitate more exciting exchanges. Most studies of dating apps focus on interfacial features and profiles rather than texting practices (Bivens & Hoque, 2018; David & Cambre, 2016; Hutson et al., 2018). But some have analyzed screenshots of texts sent through dating apps and posted to social media. These studies suggest hyper-masculine texts – from sending eggplant emojis to trolling – make women feel threatened (Ging & Siapera, 2018; Hess & Flores, 2018; Shaw, 2016; Thompson, 2018). My respondents encountered hyper-masculine texts on occasion. But they were more concerned with the boring texts they received, as they encountered them far more often and were more perplexed about what to do about them.

Along with receiving lots of boring texts, my respondents suggested texting on dating apps caused anxiety. Others have noted this aspect of texting as well (Ansari and Klinenberg, 2016). They have shown that texting can induce anxiety because there is no recognized etiquette for how long responses should take. As people never know for certain when to expect a response, they often begin to wonder what they did wrong if a response is slow to come. Waiting for a text can also lead one to think more about, and thus increase their desire for, the person they are expecting a text from. For these reasons, texting often feels like a game, with users behaving in ways that

create uncertainty, anxiety, and desire.

Scholarship has suggested ghosting and angst-inducing boredom mutually reinforce each other at the level of the dating app user (Halversen et al., 2021; LeFebvre et al., 2019; Timmermans et al., 2020). In this chapter, I show how these practices and feelings are cultivated by dating apps. I do this by presenting two themes from my interviews. I first show that my respondents switched from dating websites to dating apps because they hoped to encounter enticing exchanges. After this, I show that instead of enticing exchanges, they were more likely to encounter boring, angst-inducing text games exacerbated by the widespread practice of ghosting. After I detail these dynamics, I then consider how dating app algorithms have contributed to them.

Desiring exciting texts

When I asked my respondents why they were using dating apps instead of websites, they often said they found the elaborate essays users wrote on dating websites off-putting. For instance, Alicia explained that when people write a lot on their profile, she begins to think, “‘What, Really!? You need to write like a five-paragraph essay about yourself?’ I start to think like this person is into themselves 124or something, you know?” Alicia also adds that long essays tend to contain lots of information that is more misleading than helpful. This is why she took out most of the information on her profile. She explains, “I had a longer thing, but that actually says a lot about me. – **Just a few key, like, adjectives?** – Yeah. ‘I’m passionate. I’m determined. I’m filled with hope.’ That really is who I am you know.”

Like Alicia, Mandy also cites the misleading character of long essays for why she cut out most of the text on her profile. “The other way,” she notes,

was like, “Alright, I already know her. Or I think I know her,” right? And then they just assume things that aren’t true. Like, “oh she just wants kids. We’re going to have kids. We’re going to have five kids, and they’re going to be named.” Hahaha, I don’t know.

Along with being a pain to read and misleading, my respondents also felt long essays were hard to keep up to date. Jane notes that “at first it was fun, right? Now it is just kind of like a headache. If I think

about it too much, I'll be like, 'Oh that's awful! Why did I say that!?'”

Many of my respondents felt long essays on dating websites were counterproductive. Instead of reading outdated and verbose descriptions, they wanted to get to know their matches in a more free-flowing manner. This is one reason they switched to dating apps.

While it is common to assume dating apps have led to a more superficial dating culture, then, this finding suggests another reason dating apps are different from dating websites: they force users to focus on texting rather than static representations of themselves and others early on in the date selection process. This communicative mode of seeking dates that dating apps require would seem to align with forging what Giddens has influentially called “pure relationships” (1993).

According to Giddens, pure relationships became a cultural ideal for intimate sexual relationships beginning in the 1970s. These pure relationships only last as long as those within them remain completely satisfied. They are thus very different from traditionally romantic relationships, where love is presumed to begin at first sight, overcome all obstacles, and last forever. Gender roles are also fluid in pure relationships. This makes it hard for partners to intuit their partners' desires and, as such, requires constant intimate communication between them. Pure relationships feel treacherous, then, because they require deep, intimate communication while always remaining precarious. Moreover, because men have not embraced this pure relationship style, women have been doing most of the emotional work required to maintain them.

Many scholars have built upon Giddens's theory of pure relationships, especially in terms of issues that have arisen from the ephemeral nature of sex he described. These scholars claim that ephemeral sex is incompatible with intimacy (Bauman, 2003), leads to a toxic hookup culture (Bogle, 2008; Kimmel, 2009), and disempowers women in one of the few domains they had previously held more power than men (Illouz, 2014).¹²⁵

Some of the women I interviewed noted their frustration with the lack of romance they found on dating apps. But if Giddens is right, this lack of romance actually conforms to a tendency in dating norms predating the emergence of dating apps by 55 years. Depictions of dating apps as hookup factories often ignore this longer trend toward more ephemeral and less rigid modes of sexuality.

The assumption that dating apps are mainly used for hookups has also been debunked. Most users do not use them primarily for hookups. And the average number of hookups users have found through them is around three (Carpenter & McEwan, 2016; Enomoto et al., 2017; Hobbs et al., 2016).

Depictions of dating apps as hookup factories are thus patently absurd. These depictions are based on the idea that because users have little besides physical appearance to go on while swiping, they will be inclined to hook up with those they match with (David & Cambre, 2016). But image-centric profiles rarely led to hookups among my respondents. Instead, the dearth of information on them made users skeptical of matches who asked for dates too quickly.

So, while physical attraction played a key role in how my respondents swiped, this rarely led to a hookup. In fact, my respondents felt physical attraction was a particularly flimsy basis to meet someone for so much as a coffee date. Before agreeing to a date, they wanted to establish a bit of rapport through texting, which they hoped would allow them to discern if their matches might have something more to offer than a nice appearance.

This makes sense. Most people are looking for a relationship to last longer than a hookup. They thus want to date people who are fun before, during, and after having sex with them. This was true of my gay respondents as well. They noted that while it was customary to send a dick pick within the first few messages of meeting someone on Grindr, they rarely hooked up with their connections. They said that this was because sexual encounters were easy for them to find without using dating apps. They thus mostly used dating apps when they wanted to try to meet someone that could potentially turn into something more substantial.

The embodied mode of attraction many scholars have argued is lost with online dating was certainly desired by my respondents (David & Cambre, 2016; Heino et al., 2010; Illouz, 2007). But they claimed embodied attraction was the easy part of dating. The hard part, they said, was finding someone interesting to talk to that could stimulate the mind. This accounts for the large number of users who describe themselves as sapiosexual – or sexually attracted to “the human mind before appearance” – on dating platforms (Sapiosexual—Wiktionary, 2019). Despite the widespread view that dating apps are mere hookup factories, then, many users, including every one of my respondents, want to find dates with more to offer than a nice appearance or a pretty face.

Encountering boring texts

My respondents adopted dating apps hoping to receive enticing texts to assess their matches. But they were inundated with boring, impersonal ones. This led to three negative outcomes: (1) they became anxious about soliciting better exchanges; (2) 126 came to learn that spending time and energy writing interesting texts is largely a waste

of time; and (3) began reciprocating the inconsiderate texting practices they encountered.

Texting inducing anxiety

My respondents hoped to receive enticing texts on dating apps. This makes sense because dating apps seem tailor-made to generate them. The mutual like protocol, for instance, ensures users their match is interested in them before they begin crafting a message. As Jenn explains, this protocol is a big improvement over having to blindly send and receive messages on dating websites:

As a girl you could receive like a hundred messages in one weekend. So, it's like a job to go through them. It's overwhelming People are messaging you, but you just don't want to talk to them. Because it's too many and it's not filtered. It's just like, I don't like any of those guys.

In contrast to blindly sending and receiving messages on dating websites, the mutual like protocol would seem to be a better design. It could give users confidence that the energy they spend crafting a text is likely to be reciprocated because it will be sent to someone who has already expressed interest.

Another dating app feature that would seem to encourage exciting texts is their use of push notifications. These notifications allow users to immediately exchange texts with each other. This rapid exchange allows dates to develop much faster than they could on dating websites, as Leo explains.

OkCupid has arguably less attentional time from its users than Tinder right now because users are constantly on Tinder swiping back and forth. It's just a more popular app, and it has more people on it. So, it's really interesting. [OkCupid] may be the better app ... but you won't get the real-time validation. OkCupid is usually like a time delay of 1, 2, 4 days. Tinder is more like, I could probably meet this person in the next couple of hours.

Push notifications can speed up the process of finding a date by allowing for immediate responses. But the dearth of information on dating app profiles also makes it hard to know how to grab someone's attention on them. This is distressing because dating apps are effectively useless if this initial step is not achieved. For Bob, this creates

a lot of anxiety. I have to have a couple of drinks in me before I try to talk to somebody. – **To meet them you mean?** – No, just to initiate conversation because that is how anxiety-prone I am. – **You mean on the app?** – On the app, yeah. I can't just like randomly talk to someone. I'm like, "oh my god, what do I say? How do I even?" You know? What do I do? Like, "nice hats?"

The anxiety of figuring out what to text on dating apps is then exacerbated by the fact that sending a quick text soon after receiving a notification is important on them. This is because a notification alerts the recipient that their match is on the 127app and ready to chat. Sending a response quickly is thus more likely to garner a response than if one waits. After which, their match is likely to have moved on to something else and their text liable to get buried beneath more timely responses. Texting on dating apps can cause anxiety, then, because they increase the stakes of sending fast, enticing texts while making it harder to do so given the limited information on most profiles.

Boring texts leading to ghosting

The anxiety of trying to quickly figure out what to text on dating apps is also exacerbated by the fact that so many matches tend to disappear without notice. Sara, for instance, noted her frustration with this after I asked her how many relationships she had found through dating apps:

Most of the time it doesn't go anywhere. It doesn't get to that point because the odds are so low. They ghost. I get ghosted. A lot of ghosting

There's too many options, and I am not chasing.
I'll give it a couple of times. But if you are not,
I'm not. I'm done. I'm not chasing.

After encountering so many ghosts, Sara discovered it is better not to chase them. Jean is learning a similar lesson in her very first exchange on Bumble:

This is the first person that I sent a message to, and it's, like, obviously I'm learning, right, because it is really. – **Do you mind if I read it? –** No go for it. – **“Your photos are stunning (yes, I stalked your Instagram account). Would love to see how you plot out the plan. I just got back from Bali and it's a strong contender for me. Do you like dogs? Mostly asking because mine is a big part of my life.”** And he responds: **“Hey there. I haven't quite figured out the island dweller life yet, but Bali sounds like that's good a place as any to do it. Love all dogs. What is yours named? Have you had her or him for a while?”** That's alright that's a pretty good response. – Yeah. But then look. I responded to him, and then he. – **Oh: “His name is Bob. Full name is Beautiful Bob. He is a character. Hunting dog in Brooklyn. I've had him for more than 2 years, since he was 6 weeks old. Looks like you must travel a lot for work. What was your last trip?”** – And then he never responded. Maybe he doesn't like Beautiful Bob. Maybe he thinks my dog's name is cheesy.

These texts that Jean sent her match illustrate the creativity and energy users often put into texting when they are new to dating apps. Exchanges like this can go on for 50 or so messages. But users rarely text with such gusto for long. In fact, Jean claims she is already

learning an important lesson in her first exchange with a ghost. But what is she learning? She is not learning what to text. She seems utterly confused why her match stopped responding. Could it have been her dog's name? The absurdity of this suggestion belies her befuddlement. Rather than learning what to text, she is learning that the energy she puts into texting is rarely reciprocated.¹²⁸

Alicia recalled learning a similar lesson while discussing dating apps with a friend.

When I first started using it, I was like, “what is this?” Like, you’d ask someone a question and they would respond but not ask a question. So, you’d say like, “oh where was that photograph, where were you visiting?” [and they’d say] like, “Paris,” [and] that’s it. Then my friend told me, I was like, “what is this?” And she’s like, “they all do that.” She showed me her Tinder ... and she is doing the same thing. She’s asking a question, and the person is responding. But they are not engaging.

Along with bemoaning the volume of unengaging responses they received, my respondents also complained that interesting responses often became monotonous over time. Rose, for instance, explains that

at first, I was like, “this is so fun and funny,” but it got old really fast. I don’t know. – **What kind of messages?** – Like, “wanna fuck?” And like, “show me your tits?” And, you know, or just like, the way somebody would start a chat would be like, “tell me your wettest fantasy,” or something. It’s like, “eww.” Or like sometimes I would think that was fun, but then, like, to me, that’s like a funny, fun joke for like a second. And then it’s just boring.

Rose found sexual messages fun at first. But she soon grew bored with them. This was a common theme among my respondents. They were

tired of chatting about the same things with different matches again and again.

The frequency that my respondents received boring texts seems to have contributed to the rampant ghosting they encountered. This can be seen in a typical exchange that Jenny had on Bumble, which I begin summarizing below:

talking about the march, where they live. He's very happy to be without roommates. You're not as impressed. Now we're going back to the weekend. Wow, ok, there's about fifty different messages there back and forth. –
Yeah, and then I decided he was boring. I said, “man these things are always so boring.”

A few messages later, Jenny then asks her match, “why do we even bother with these things, lol?” To which he responds, “OK, let's get a drink.” This was the last text in the exchange. When I asked Jenny why she had not responded, she said that by the time he had asked for a date, it was already too late. She was too bored to go out with him.

Like Jenny, many of my respondents bemoaned how boring conversations were on dating apps. This led some of them to experiment with different strategies to try to elicit more excitement. Following advice from a dating guru, for instance, Ada began telling all of her matches that she is reading a book. Unfortunately, this did not help much. “If it works,” she explained,¹²⁹

It only works in the short-term. They ask you, “what are you reading?” And they recommend you a book. But it never guarantees that they're going to turn into a date. It just keeps it alive a little bit. You feel good about yourself for exchanging a few sentences with a stranger.

Like Ada, many of my respondents tried different strategies to try to elicit more exciting texts. But they tended to find that any excitement they managed to generate was unlikely to last. This was troubling because they knew lackluster texts were likely to lead to ghosting rather than the rapport they wanted to establish before setting up a date. Yet despite their best efforts to solicit better responses, they

seemed trapped in this pernicious feedback loop, with boring texts leading to ghosting, and ghosting leading to even more boring texts.

Reciprocating inconsiderate behaviors

My respondents were subjected to thoughtless texting practices on dating apps. But they also learned to reciprocate in kind. This was the case, even though they felt these practices were inconsiderate and nonsensical. Alicia, for instance, recalled being annoyed by rampant ghosting on dating apps. Yet she admitted to ghosting herself.

There is so much flakiness. Like so much flakiness, it's really unbelievable. You could be going back and forth with someone, and [...] unless that person is sitting across from me, I'm not sure it's going to happen. You know what I mean? ... I guess if you met, I don't know, you met someone out at a party or something, and they are like, "let's get together," it didn't feel as flaky, you know? It didn't feel as like you're talking to someone and you're messaging them, and they just disappear. And I've done that too, you know. ... Where I was just like, "do I want to reply? I will reply." And then it's like, "well I don't want to meet this person." And then you just stop replying.

Like many of my respondents, Alicia ghosted her matches despite seeing it as inconsiderate to do so. She also associated ghosting with flakiness, or unreliableness. My respondents especially bemoaned the practice of cancelling dates at the last minute. For instance, Alicia recalls how offended she was when someone flaked out on her, even though she was not in the mood to go on the date herself:

I actually was not even really feeling it [that day], so I was kind of hoping he wasn't going to show up. I was like praying. I was like, "please, I hope this person doesn't come!" And then he didn't

[show up], and I was like, “really! Who does that?!” And so, I sent him a message, and I was like, “I’m here, I’ll wait for a few minutes. I don’t know what’s going on.” And then, I didn’t even wait for a few minutes. I just left because I really just wanted to get out of there.¹³⁰

It certainly feels awful to be flaked on. But some of my respondents flaked out on dates as a matter of course. Diana explained that she spends a lot of time anticipating dates, but “when the moment comes, I just can’t be bothered, so I ditch a lot. I was going to go on a date with someone tonight, and then I was just like, ‘I can’t.’ And so, I came here.”

Flaking out on dates is certainly inconsiderate. But it may be even worse to ghost someone after meeting them in person. Even so, some of my respondents seemed accustomed to doing this. Julie, for example, did not seem to think this behavior warranted an explanation when she recalled ghosting a recent date:

Back in March, I was on spring break from school, so I downloaded Tinder for one week during spring break and I met this one guy. I met two guys, one guy I met, and then the other guy I met after. And I ghosted the first guy for the second guy. – **What do you mean by ghosted him.** – Like we were going to meet up, but then I just stopped answering him.

Julie did not explain why she ghosted this guy she had already met. But Jenny provides a glimpse into why one might do this. After she told her friends about someone that became hostile after she declined his offer for a second date, they told her it is better to ghost guys that she does not want to see again. Recalling this advice, she said,

I don’t understand why he was so upset that I said we didn’t vibe. Like I thought that was normal. My girlfriends were like, “no you’re supposed to, this is how you do it, OK. They message you, and

then you write one-word answers.” So you’re responding, but you kind of ghost them out a little bit and just go like, “Oh!,” “Haha,” and stuff like that, until it just, like, fades. I’m like that’s ridiculous. It’s a waste of his time. It’s a waste of my time. Why would I do that to someone? – **Yeah** – But apparently not. I should have listened to my friend.

Here, Jenny notes how ridiculous she finds ghosting. Yet the fragile egos of some men led her to conclude it is sometimes necessary.

My respondents also suggested the flakiness they encountered on dating apps made dates met through them feel less real. As Charlotte explained, “you’re not a real person until you get into it a little bit more. The three guys that I’m seeing right now all have nicknames. They are not real people.” The superficiality of dating app dates can thus last long after matches have been met in the flesh.

Algorithmically induced boredom

It is still common to bemoan the ephemeral nature of sexual encounters made on dating apps. But the findings above indicate this misses a lot about their novelty. Their text-friendly features – ensuring mutual interest and allowing users to interact whenever their phones are handy – encourage users to anticipate exciting, rapid exchanges. Yet despite these features, my respondents described receiving boring texts that led to inconsiderate behaviors, such as ghosting and flaking out on dates at the last minute. These outcomes were likely induced, in part, by dating app algorithms.

Because dating app algorithms tend to incentivize quick engagement to monetize, they are likely to recommend impersonal texters quickly because of the rapid interactivity they generate. This would explain why so many of my respondents encountered boring texters soon after they joined dating apps. After a few encounters with these boring texters, they came to learn that the time and energy they put into getting to know their matches was rarely reciprocated. This led them to begin sending the same impersonal, and thus boring, messages they received.

The boring environments my respondents encountered on dating apps also led to self-fulfilling cynicism, where users would send boring texts expecting them to fail, and were wholly unsurprised when they did. After a few weeks emerged in these thoughtless milieus, they

started anticipating inconsiderate behaviors from their matches, feeling good about “exchanging a few sentences with a stranger,” and expecting to ghost or get ghosted soon after. Because ghosting and boredom reinforce each other in this way on dating apps, it is hard for users to establish rapport with matches before setting up a date.

This difficulty of establishing rapport is exacerbated by the negative views users have of dating app algorithms. As I noted in [Chapter 4](#), most dating app users assume these algorithms are calibrated to maximize profits instead of providing them with quality recommendations. This assumption can lead users to spend less time crafting messages because they think it will be wasted on matches that are not compatible in the first place ([Sharabi, 2020](#)). Yet the fact that users do not trust dating app algorithms to vet their matches makes it even more important for them to do so through texting. Algorithmic cynicism thus leads to a double bind: making it more important to generate interesting exchanges while making it harder to do so. And despite my respondents’ best efforts to overcome this double bind, few were able to do so.

The difficulty my respondents had generating interesting conversations on dating apps led to more frustration in the women than the men in my sample. They were frustrated by this because they felt building rapport with matches was the only way they could ensure their dates might have something more to offer than a nice appearance and to counteract the hookupy vibe of dating apps. This indicates they did not embrace what Illouz has called “unloving,” where people choose not to choose, not to engage, not to pursue, and not to commit as a way to affirm themselves ([2019](#)); instead, they seemed very annoyed that navigating the angst-inducing boredom of dating apps seemed unavoidable for anyone wishing to find sexual intimacy today.

The angst-inducing boredom detailed in this chapter also aligns with accounts of anxiety and boredom generated by social media more broadly ([Chun, 2016](#); [Dean, 2010](#); [Sampson, 2020](#)). Mark Fisher has argued that social media bombards us with so much boring content that we no longer have time to feel bored ([2018](#), p. 550). He adds that this leads to anxiety that, like an itch, “gets worse the more one scratches” ([2017](#), p. 371). Building on this insight, others have suggested social media compels users to alleviate boredom through engagement that tends to become more and more repetitive and boring over time ([Dean, 2010, 2018](#), p. 94; [Paasonen, 2021](#); [Pettman, 2016](#); [Kendall, 2018](#)). In the context of dating websites, Aho has found that users try to escape loneliness by chatting with multiple connections at once ([2016](#)). But they end up spreading their attention so thin they have trouble forging a solid connection with anyone. He

thus argues dating websites often leave users feeling even more lonely than they were before joining them.

If chatting with multiple connections left users lonely on dating websites, how much worse must it feel on dating apps, where one always knows those they are chatting with could become a ghost?

Conclusion

The mood of angst-inducing boredom detailed in this chapter contrasts sharply with the hyper-intimacy that dating websites cultivated a mere 20 years ago. This shift from hyper-intimacy to angst-inducing boredom is misaligned with the desires of most users. But it aligns with the transition from neoliberalism to data colonialism I have been detailing throughout this book. Hyper-intimacy aligns with neoliberalism because it encourages users to invest time and energy in pursuit of a single relationship to maximize their romantic fortunes as part of their human capital. By contrast, angst-inducing boredom aligns with data colonialism because it can easily be worked into the kind of rapid interactivity that media companies now profit from.

Dating apps induce this interactivity by compelling users to habitually text each other throughout the day by algorithmically calibrating networked flows of information through blinking, dinging, and vibrating feedback. This illustrates how far power has shifted from Foucauldian discipline, where knowledge of individuals was fed back to them through technologies of self – confessionals, panoptic surveillance towers, psychoanalytic couches, etc. – in order to work them into docile cogs for industrial machines (Deleuze, 1992). As virality machines have become the dominant technological infrastructure within data colonialism, users' bodies are sensitized through incessant feedback sent through push notifications and orchestrated by opaque algorithms.

As dating apps couple their users with this feedback, users learn to engage cynically, feeling bored and anxious in environments where they always know the texts they anticipate may never come. Their algorithmic cynicism then feeds into this anxiety, making it more important to send enticing texts at the same time as it becomes harder to do so given the lack of trust they have that their matches are even remotely compatible. With a keen desire to get dating apps to work and limited means to do so, they continue to engage, hoping to win the dating crapshoot they feel compelled to play despite the long odds they presume are stacked against them. As they do, they resort to thoughtless behaviors – sending boring texts, ghosting, and flaking out on dates at the last minute – while considering these behaviors to be

counterproductive and inconsiderate.¹³³

Getting ghosted by a good friend or long-term lover would certainly feel worse than getting ghosted by a match one has just met on a dating app (LeFebvre et al., 2019; Navarro et al., 2020; Powell et al., 2021). But the frequency of ghosting on these apps intensifies the mood of angst-inducing boredom cultivated by them, which can then seep into the psyches of users by way of the distributed unconscious. This makes it hard for users to invest in matches and increases the time and energy they spend sending boring texts, ghosting, and getting ghosted.

Immersed in these thoughtless environments, users come to expect inconsiderate behaviors from their matches, and to reciprocate in kind. This makes it hard for them to see the humanity in their matches, as well as in themselves. Like this, data colonialism turns social relations into fungible things to be sold by compelling users to incessantly work at generate connections, precisely because they tend to vanish as quickly as they appear – like ghosts.

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Part 5 Ghosts in the virality machine

10 One-way funhouse mirrors

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In part four, I revealed racist and sexist ghosts governing dating apps while suggesting they turn their users into ghosts themselves. In this fifth and final part of the book, I explore the stakes of this becoming ghost of the dating app user. I do this by following typical upgrades my respondents made through the dating platform ecology – from OkCupid to Tinder to Bumble and beyond.

As I explore these upgrades, I first show how dating apps act like opaque black boxes to users. This opacity makes it easy for these apps to conduct surreptitious experiments on their users because they cannot see how they were being used. I then show that these experiments led my respondents to upgrade to newer apps, either to avoid obsessive repetitions induced by older ones or hoping to optimize their dates by staying at the bleeding edge of AI.

These upgrades to newer platforms rarely led to much improvement for my respondents. But they habituated them to inserting themselves into rapidly changing dating dynamics able to update their body parts with new drives. I illustrate this point by showing how my respondents felt compelled to engage dating apps in a way that corroborates Illouz's contention that they turn female sex organs into cheap commodities for desirable men to accumulate (2019).

In fact, I show that despite Bumble's claim to use an algorithm helping women feel empowered to go after their relationship goals, the women in my sample felt compelled to come off as less serious about dating than they were and to try not to become emotionally attached to the aloof guys they met and had sex with. Given this masculine gaze shaping their search for dates, I argue dating apps act like one-way funhouse mirrors for the companies that own them, allowing them to surreptitiously capture their users' every move while conduct inscrutable AI experiments on them and showing them a distorted picture of the world. This distortion, I ultimately suggest, encourages users to to update their body parts with new drives to serve data colonialism.

Migrating to the black box

My respondents were not worried that upgrading from dating sites to

dating apps was part of a trend toward black boxing the algorithm from the perspective of the user in the online dating industry. This is unsurprising. Black boxes are designed to seem natural. Indeed, this seeming naturalness is precisely what lends them their power.

According to Latour, black boxes are forged through struggles between myriad actants, from scientific instruments to viruses. These actants each work to devise a coalition of other actants to go along with their mode of translating input into output. They do this through various techniques – wars of wills, dances of seduction, etc. – as they try to consolidate power through the alliances they forge (Latour, 1993, p. 168). This makes it important to unpack the power of black boxes by uncovering the struggle concealed by the sleek, opaque surface they present to us (Harman, 2009).

Unpacking this power of algorithmic black boxes is not easy. In *The Black Society*, Pasquale notes that algorithmic media are so powerful because they are devised by legions of engineers and guarded by myriad lawyers (2016, p. 6). Lax laws also allow these media to creepily surveil their users. In fact, creepiness is tantamount to a business imperative for them: invasiveness gives them the upper hand on their competition, while secrecy reduces their chances of getting sued.

Despite this secrecy, it has been well documented that these media create cascading disadvantages for marginalized users. Yet disconnecting or hiding from these media would only exacerbate the problem. These tactics would only be possible for those privileged enough to forego the resources platforms now allocate. Instead of hiding, then, Pasquale argues we should work to ensure their algorithms benefit everyone.

Cheney-Lippold has also noted his concern over the power of algorithmic media. He claims that because their algorithms tend to be wrong about who we are, they often feel like “specters” haunting us whenever we connect to the internet (2017, p. 258). He thus argues we should try to hide from them by scrambling the traces of our data footprint through anonymized browsers and random search generators.

These tactics have their place. But much of the data captured by platforms is accepted for the customized recommendations they provide: suggestions Google gives for searches, Netflix gives for movies, and Spotify gives for music. Anonymization and random search generators would be counterproductive in these contexts.

It is thus important to differentiate between algorithms instead of thinking of them in general. Certain algorithms do certain things. And the things they do can be transparent or hidden. It is their hiddenness that is the problem, not algorithms themselves. Their hiddenness

makes it impossible for us to know how we are being used and easy for us to be controlled.

AI black boxes

The algorithms now governing society are hidden because media companies are allowed to hide them away as proprietary while using complex AI fundamentally inaccessible to human comprehension. To unpack how this AI now affects us, we might revisit the Turing test, with a twist. Instead of asking if machines can think, ¹⁴¹which few would dispute today, it seems more pertinent to ask, how do machines want us to think?

Hayles provides a good place to begin answering this question in her seminal book exploring cybernetic culture, *How We Became Posthuman* (1999, p. xiii). In the preface to this book, she argues that every time you converse with someone through a computer, you accept the underlying premise of the interrogator in the Turing test: that you could fail to connect embodied presence with its representation. As such, you accept that you could mistake a human for a machine, and vice versa, as well as that others could mistake you for a machine. This means we have become so entangled with computers that our perceptions of ourselves cannot be disentangled from them (1999, p. xiii). In other words, we have become posthuman, constituted in large part by how we think we are perceived by others as they encounter us through computer screens.

Hayles's account of posthuman subjectivity is compelling. But because she detailed it before the advent of social media apps and virality machines, an update seems warranted to unpack the effects of this new mode of mediation.

Unlike networked PCs in the 1990s, virality machines incessantly datafy our every move and shape our encounters through tactile protocols and haptic feedback allocated by AI. The crucial step for unpacking our subjectivity in this context no longer comes when we see ourselves as the interrogator in a Turing test but when we see AI in that role, when we see that it matters less what others think of us as they encounter us through computers than what AI makes of us as it penetrates our bodies, recalibrates our desires, and determines how we are seen, by whom, and when.

As apps interrogate us from behind the sleek contours of the black boxes they present to us, they encourage us to try to give them what we think they desire for the off chance that they could grant us what we need. And we often become more solicitous of their approval the less certain we are of what they want. Indeed, those who are not solicitous in this way risk becoming invisible within the expanding

domains of everyday life they control.

Updating to newer dating platforms

Along with keeping us in the dark about how we are being used, today's apps also have unprecedented power to shape our behaviors and modes of expression. They do this through haptic feedback, tactile protocols, and algorithms calibrated to be addicting. At the same time, their opacity makes it hard to unpack the social forces undergirding our lives. It is thus important to grasp how these apps are pulling our bodies out of joint and into new configurations. If we do not, we will have little choice but to go with the flow, remaining implicated within, if not complicit with, oppressive forces perpetuating the status quo.

In this section, I continue detailing the contours of these flows within the online dating industry by following typical upgrades my respondents made through the dating platform ecology. In so doing, I focus on three main reasons they had for making these upgrades: first, they felt it was much easier to use dating apps than websites; second, they were tired of obsessive repetitions induced by older platforms; and third, they presumed that because newer apps would be more technologically advanced, they would help them find better matches.

The ease of using apps

I have already described how frustrating dating apps were for my respondents, but Neil explains why he thinks they nevertheless become so popular:

What's the quote? The medium was the message? The media, the form, also led to the content. You have this small device that is not something that you necessarily want to read ten thousand little characters on in someone's profile. But just seeing pictures of them? It really lends itself to that.

Neil's explanation here is plausible. As image-friendly phones became integral to everyday life, dating platforms seemed to conform to their affordances as a matter of course. And as users upgraded to these apps en masse, dating websites lost the critical mass of users they needed to work well.

Valarie suggests the ease of using dating apps is another reason

they became so popular. Explaining how simple Tinder was to set up, she says, “I think it links to Facebook, so it just chose my photos for me, and that was it.” Because dating apps are so easy to use, it makes sense that they appeal to lazy users. Leah recalls a few years back, when “there was no app, so we had to log into our computer to check our messages, which was fine back then. But now I think people are lazy. They don’t even log into their computer to check messages.”

While Leah thinks dating apps attract lazy users, she does not consider how they may have contributed to her own laziness while using them. Detailing her return to dating after going out with the first guy she had met on OkCupid for three years, she says,

I don’t know what’s wrong with me. When I was in Phili, I was just so lazy. I couldn’t find anyone I was interested in. **But you were still on OkCupid? Or you’re just trying to do Tinder?** No, I wasn’t on OkCupid. I was on Tinder. I was on Coffee Meets Bagel. All the people were so boring there. I just didn’t even want to make the effort to know them. I didn’t want to go out with them. **So why were you not on OkCupid anymore?** Ummmm, I thought it wasn’t user friendly. Like everybody now, you know, has a smart phone. It’s just easier to check on your smartphone.

Here, Leah describes feeling unmotivated to meet people on dating apps. But this did not lead her to return to OkCupid, where she had been more successful because she felt most people had switched to dating apps.

In addition to inducing laziness, dating apps also seem to reduce attention spans. As Beth notes,¹⁴³

people don’t have the patience to read through the profiles now. Everybody is on their smartphones, so how much time do I really have to open this up and read the profiles and pay attention to what somebody has to say. Like 10 or

15 years back, you did not have a cell phone, and you were online. You had more time to actually read and browse and, you know. So, attention spans were much higher then.

This shortened attention span that Beth claims dating apps have led to corroborates a trend Fuller and Goffey have explored (2012). They argue that instead of shifting our attention from one activity to the next, we now distribute our attention among multiple ongoing activities. Unable to pay attention long enough to get sidetracked, they suggest we now live in a perpetual state of semi-distraction.

Algorithms inducing obsessive repetitions

Semi-distraction aptly describes how many of my respondents engaged dating apps. While they saw this as a problem, dating apps do not seem to want their full attention. From their distractedness, they can more easily manipulate their desires as a kind of crowdsourced proprioceptive intelligence, one that does not amplify the knowledge of the crowd but, rather, crowds out most of the knowledge within it.

And as dating apps eschew the knowledge of their users, the knowledge they create by experimenting on them is not fed back to them in a way they have conscious access to; instead, it penetrates their bodies, leading to obsessive repetitions – incessantly swiping, quickly sending banal texts, habitually ghosting, etc. – even as users see these behaviors as inconsiderate and nonsensical.

The obsessive repetitions dating apps induce led my respondents to upgrade to newer ones. Julia, for instance, explains that she switched from Tinder to Bumble for the following reason:

Back in March I was on spring break from school. So, I downloaded Tinder for one week during spring break, and I met this one guy And I guess I didn't know. I didn't understand that Tinder is not to be taken seriously, and I took it a little bit seriously, and I think he felt crowded. He didn't want a girlfriend. – **Oh, I see.** – So, then I downloaded all of these things [other dating apps] so I could forget him. Distraction, you know. – **So, has it been working? have you**

been distracted enough? – I've been meeting people, but I'm trying really hard not to get stuck on one person. So, you know, I'll go out with anyone.

Julia found out too late that Tinder is seen as a hookup app. But the newer apps she tried had not led to much improvement. In fact, she ended up altering her entire approach to dating in a way that aligns with Tinder's business model: instead of searching for a serious relationship, she goes out with anyone and tries hard not to get stuck on any one person.¹⁴⁴

Julia's resignation to casual dating was common among the women in my sample. They noted that dating apps had sped up the pace of their connections to potential dates, which ultimately made it harder for them to find the substantial relationships they were seeking.

A similar dynamic of increased connectivity leading to adverse outcomes has been found on many social media apps. Scholars note that AI-induced engagement in particular has led to problematic outcomes on these apps, such as polarizing discourse on Twitter, genocidal violence on Facebook, and podophilic tendencies on YouTube (Fisher, 2022). A key factor contributing to these problematic effects is the high level of liquidity within today's deregulated finance sector. With loads of cheap money to spend, venture capitalists aggressively court tech start-ups by allowing them to conduct whatever AI social experiments their largely White, anti-social creators happen to think up.

The false allure of AI

The power that social media companies now have to shape connections with near impunity has caused an uproar. But the opacity of AI can still be alluring (Chun, 2013, p. 2). With few ways to falsify claims dating apps make about the AI they use, some users surely believe they have the magical powers dating apps advertise. Jenny, for instance, illustrates how alluring AI can be while describing the features she would like to see on a dating app:

Basically, just giving me an already filtered pool. Because when I go on an app, like you saw, I have to swipe through fifty people to go right on one. So, if I could have an app that was more tailored to me. You know, if it could scan your eyes and

be like, OK, we know the correlation of the eye movements and the photo, we know what you like attraction wise, and then if they could scan my conversation to see what language processing and scan other guys conversations and make matches linguistically to get personality traits based on the language that you use.

Jenny's belief that advanced technology can discern what she wants from big data illustrates how alluring AI was for some of my respondents. This allure compelled them to seek out the latest trending app to try to optimize their dates. Jenny adds that it is important to upgrade to newer apps because

when a new dating app comes out, people that find out about it first are generally higher up on the, you know, social ladder, and all the other ladders, because, you know, that's just my hunch. Like anything else, the people that find out about something first are probably more attractive, cooler, or whatever. So yeah, I feel like Hppn had like a better pool of partners, whereas Tinder is, everybody knows what Tinder is.

Like Jenny, Charlotte tries to keep up to date with the latest dating app as well. As she explains it,¹⁴⁵

You kind of want to follow what is most vogue, you know. Like a couple of years ago it was Hinge or Coffee Meets Bagel, and there was a bunch of those floating around. – **Yeah, I still use Coffee Meets Bagel. Maybe I am behind the times.** – I haven't heard of that one lately. I was on that for a minute. I did not like it. – **You didn't like it? What is the new app? do you know?** – What is the newest one? – **Yeah.** – I think that it is kind

of The League.

Charlotte illustrates how alluring new dating apps were for some of my respondents. But Chun warns that upgrading to newer apps rarely leads to better outcomes; instead, it often leaves us close to “the same; bored, overwhelmed, and anxious all at once” (2016, p. 1).

Attesting to the boredom that can ensue after an app upgrade, Leslie says that when she first joined Tinder, it was

really interesting because I thought it was really good people. So, I thought everybody is going to be so cool and so nice. And then blah blah, after a while it just gets lame again. So, I just went to Bumble, and then Bumble was the best.

Soon after she joined Bumble, however, she claimed it also started losing its appeal:

I met so many decent, good, let's say, fine people. But afterwards, the people that I met weren't that interesting. So, I was like, “OK, whatever, let me try something else.” And after you start using the app for like two, three months, you start seeing the same people like two, three times, which gets super depressing. So, then it's just like, I change to another app.

Like Leslie, many of my respondents felt compelled to upgrade to the latest trending app despite finding that any benefits from these upgrades tended to be short-lived at best.

Revalorizing female sex organs

My respondents upgraded to newer apps to avoid obsessive repetitions induced by older ones or to try to optimize their access to quality dates. Any potential benefits from these upgrades were short-lived at best. But these upgrades are part of a viral process whereby new apps exploit the social dynamics they capture, penetrate, and recalibrate.

Throughout this book, I have explored this virality at three key moments: first, OkCupid encouraged users to act like entrepreneurs of

intimacy seeking their romantic fortunes; second, Tinder compelled users to act like addicts swiping for superficial jolts of recognition; and third, Bumble incentivized users to text away the anxiety-inducing boredom of waiting for responses that often never came. 146 These rapid upgrades illustrate how fast dating dynamics can now change as penetrating measures mine novel data extracted through virality machines.

This viral penetration advances a process traceable to the mid-20th century. At that time, techno-science began uncovering ways to make use of dynamic rather than homeostatic systems in many domains of scientific inquiry. These new domains would ultimately provide the scientific foundation for the transition from industrial to post-industrial economies (Parisi & Terranova, 2000). This transition has profoundly affected how the female body comes to matter: within industrial societies, female bodies were put to use as unremunerated labor in the private sphere so that more profits could be extracted from male labor power; but in post-industrial societies, female bodies have become integral sources of turbulence for companies to profit from.

Illouz details how this works within the male-dominated visual industries, from porn to social media to online dating: by revalorizing female sex organs through their rapid dissemination (2019). This increased spread of female sex organs, she adds, devalues them at the same time as it affords privileged men easier access to them (2019, p. 166).

The women in my sample corroborated Illouz's contention in four key ways. First, they felt compelled to embrace a casual approach to dating where sex was rarely confined to monogamy. Second, they expected to be pressured for sex before they were ready by men who would discount them for a serious relationship if sex happened quickly. Third, they felt they had to come off as more emotionally detached than they were to avoid scaring guys off. And fourth, they expected aloofness from the men they dated.

Feeling compelled to date casually

Many of the women in my sample claimed they felt compelled to date casually on dating apps. Beth, for instance, says dating apps have made monogamy obsolete: "you either have to be not in a relationship and be willing to move from one person to the other. Or you have to be in a relationship but be open to the fact that your partner might be in an open relationship." Both of these options looked bad to Beth and most of my respondents. None of them were looking for an open relationship, yet the hooky vibe of dating apps made it hard for

them to admit they were looking for something serious. Sophia begins to say she wants to be married, for example, but quickly opts for a more open-ended goal:

In fact, I want to be married. – You want to do what? – Be married. Or fine. I don’t want to be married. But I want to find someone that I want to be with and start that part of my life. – You want to be in a long-term, monogamous relationship? – Yeah, and like, apparently that is a really crazy thing to want in this town. Is that too idealistic?¹⁴⁷

Here, Sophia illustrates how difficult it can be for women to come off as serious about finding a lasting relationship on dating apps. Yet despite settling for a more casual goal, she still wonders if she is being too idealistic.

Casual dating was frustrating for most of the women I interviewed. But Tinder’s podcast, *DTR*, asserts we all just want to

spend the first few months not talking but, rather, having all of the sex. And then, when that slows down enough for us to get some words out of our mouths, those words are intelligent and impassioned. But the fun stuff has to happen first. ([DTR](#))

That Tinder advocates this impetuous approach to dating is unsurprising. According to Jeff, its method of connecting users based on little more than “a small blurb about who they are and no other matching type of algorithm” just feels reckless. Yet despite Tinder’s assurance we all just want to fuck first and ask questions later, many of the women in my sample struggled to straddle the fine line between not wanting to look desperate and taking proactive steps to find the lasting relationships they were looking for. Mandy illustrates this struggle by saying she joined dating apps out of “loneliness. Hahaha, no, not loneliness. I just wanted to find someone, you know, to date, and be with, maybe, hopefully, in the future, who knows.” Mandy’s shift in tone here, going from the desperation of loneliness to something more chill in the space of a few words, suggests she is

trying to come off as more nonchalant than she feels.

Like Mandy, Alicia seemed to be trying to come off as more chill than she felt by how she changed her bio. Initially, she had written that she was only interested in “long-term dating, because that is actually what I’m looking for, but I just changed it last night to long-term dating and new friends because I don’t want to, like, scare people off, you know?” Here, Alicia indicates she felt compelled to say she is OK with making new friends even though this is not what she actually wants.

The desire for quick sex in men

Casual dating was also frustrating for the women in my sample because they felt there was an unwritten rule that men would expect sex within the first few dates yet would write them off for a serious relationship if sex happened quickly. As Ada explains,

When you meet a guy with that mindset (to have sex), they never will consider you for a long time. I don’t know if that’s true, but that’s kind of my working theory – **Was there ever a time when you had a hookup and continued to see the person?** – Yeah, but it was just for sex buddies. It was never turning into like a real relationship.

The men in my sample confirmed Ada’s theory that they would not consider women for a serious relationship if sex happened quickly. For instance, Jeff notes that¹⁴⁸

I never actually met somebody on a dating thing that I actually really wanted to see again; you know. And I’m thinking that that’s because sex already happened, you know what I mean? I don’t know where you go from there. You don’t start, well in my case, I don’t really necessarily start dating people I have sex with the first time I meet them – **You never do?** – I don’t think that I’ve ever had a girlfriend that I’ve slept with on the first date.

While the men I interviewed agreed that a serious relationship could not develop if sex happened quickly, they also seemed to expect sex within the first few dates. Mandy recalled how this expectation came up during a recent date she had been on:

And then the funny thing is, this one guy is like, “well it’s the third date!” and I’m like, “what does that mean? Am I supposed to fuck you right now? on the table?” Like I don’t know what that means, haha. He’s like, “you haven’t done anything!” And I don’t think there’s a set rule for that kind of stuff. It’s just, do you feel comfortable enough to do that, you know?

The expectation that men have for quick sex was noted by many of the women in my sample. Some attributed this to the enabling behavior of other women who let them have it. But a caveat usually followed: that women should feel free to have casual sex if they want to.

Going with the flow

The solution to this problem of quick sex and casual dates was often seen as some version of going with the flow. According to this rationale, being too focused on a serious relationship prevents one from connecting in the many ways that one can. Crystal, who is a love coach, says she encourages a more casual approach to dating because

there is nothing wrong with wanting a commitment, and there’s nothing wrong with wanting to be married and having that desire. But when you attach it to any one person that you meet, that is where the sabotage comes in. So, I think that understanding authenticity, understanding who you are, is access to not needing to attach yourself to someone, willing to, kind of, go with the flow and see where it goes.

Crystal adds that going with the flow tends to lead to a long-term relationship, almost as a matter of course.

I don't need to latch onto... any one guy that I think is a possibility. I can just be open to how the experience evolves with one person and, you know, spend more and more time with them until, all of a sudden, we have been together for twenty years.

While Crystal suggests going with the flow can lead directly to long-term relationships, many of the women in my sample were frustrated with this approach.¹⁴⁹

Aloofness of desirable men

The women in my sample were frustrated with going with the flow because it had led to lots of boring dates and plenty of bad sex with aloof guys along the way. Sophia, for instance, explained that she has been on a steady flow of casual dates, but the long-term relationship she wants has been elusive.

I have a different date with someone like every night, and then I usually don't hear from them again. And I don't necessarily reach out. But it is rare for someone to make another plan, because no one wants to be vulnerable.

In the past, Sophia's reluctance to reach out after a date would hardly be worth mentioning. It would have been assumed that her date should take the initiative because of traditional gender roles. These gender roles are still embraced by many while dating. But they are placed in tension with changing gender norms in many other domains of life. As Charlotte explains,

I have to tap into my masculine energy at work, right? To get ahead. So, I have to be like – “Yo, I need this. Yo, I need this” – to get ahead in my job. But if I do that in my dating life, I will look like a fucking psychopath, you know? – **No, you can do that. You can do that.** – Yeah, but I don't want to do it. I don't want to do that. –

Well, yeah, you don't want to. – I don't want to. – Well, you don't have to. It's okay. But you can. – I don't want to be the one that cares more.

It makes sense that Charlotte does not want to be the one who cares more while dating. As Illouz notes, the person who cares more in sexual relationships often becomes vulnerable (2012). This is because the more aloof partner can always threaten to break up if they do not get what they want. In *Sadomasochism in Everyday Life*, Lynn Chancer illustrates how aloofness tends to lend one power in psycho-social terms (1992). Talking about her experience while dating an aloof guy, she noted he made her insecure and uncertain by “calling forth a never-ending specter of possible rejection, disapproval, and pronouncements of diminished worthiness” (1992, p. 7). This left her in a perpetual state of anxiety trying to please him. And while she was not forced to be in this relationship, she notes that broader social forces of power and powerlessness that have been entangled with sexuality for hundreds of years make it so that women are more often in this position of being subserviant to male desires.

The way aloofness can lend one power in intimate relationship might seem to naturally disenfranchise women because it is often assumed that women are biologically wired to care more about romantic relationships. But this assumption is quite recent. This indicates it is not natural but a social convention (Illouz, 2012, pp. 62, 64). In fact, up to the 19th century, men were expected to prove their ardor, strongly express their feelings, and make solid commitments with very little to go on. Moreover, career paths and all-male associations consolidated male power through the institution of the family up through the 1960s. But these mechanisms for bolstering male power have eroded. According to Illouz, this has led to a new mode of hegemonic masculinity: instead of valorizing patriarchal power in the family, it now valorizes those who gain access to sex without having to take on the added responsibility of family life (2012). Instead of naturally being commitment-phobic, then, Illouz contends men have become less invested in commitment as their material and symbolic power has become less tied to having a family.

Along with being less invested in commitment, desirable men also have a much larger pool of dates to choose from than most women. This is because men tend to be less discriminating than women about whom they will date. Desirable men are thus a scarce resource in today's dating environment where, as Illouz puts it, “women's sexual and emotional availability is in over-supply” (2012, p. 85). With so many options, these desirable men often become struck with decision

paralysis. Half-heartedly pursuing many dates at once, information overload sets in, and they find it hard to build strong emotional bond with any of them.

The women I interviewed echoed this depiction of men as ambivalent and aloof. Sophia, for example, characterized the guys she has met through dating apps in the following way:

They meet you, and you are pretty enough to fuck That is what I keep thinking all the time: that I am pretty; I am fuckable. But I don't know. I personally think I'm really funny. So, I don't know what it is. If I am too short for people? They don't want to, like, bring home a short girl? I don't know. I think I do feel things strongly – **Like emotionally getting attached to people you mean?** – Yes. I mean, I am trying to be better about that.

By trying to resist the urge to become emotionally attached to dates that see her as pretty enough to fuck but not to bring home, Sophia illustrates the work many women feel compelled to put into seeming casual about dating today.

Performing for the masculine gaze

The women in my sample suggested that dating apps function, at least in part, as Illouz has described: using their bodies as cheap commodities for the masculine-controlled visual industries to profit from and privileged men to accumulate. Illouz also suggests that this devaluing of female bodies has all but liquidated key emotional capacities long associated with femininity from sexual relationships, such as care and reciprocity; instead, aloofness long associated with masculinity has been valorized within them. In her view, this has led both men and women to seek only their own pleasure in a mutual embrace of masculine detachment.

Illouz gets a lot right about sexual relationships today. But it is important to note that the women in my sample did not embrace the masculine mode of detachment she says they do. Instead, they were extremely frustrated with dating apps because they felt compelled to perform for the masculine gaze they encountered on them, to come off as more casual about dating than they were, and to expect aloofness

151 from the men they met. A key reason they felt they had to do this can be attributed to dating app algorithms. Below, I explore why this is the case, using Bumble's thoughtfulness algorithm as a case in point.

Dividual thought control

Like the revalorization of female bodies detailed above, most of the problematic dynamics unpacked in this book were expressed by women – from the creation of a safe space for sex on OkCupid to the racist swipe drive of Tinder to the bored ghosts of Bumble. If Parisi and Terranova are correct, this centering of feminine concern is partly attributable to techno-capitalist disruption that has occurred as control societies have disenfranchised women along persistent intersections of oppression, starting in the second half of the twentieth century (2000).

As I detailed in [Chapter 6](#), the viral mechanism of datafication and algorithmic modulation that Parisi and Terranova have detailed by way of Deleuze's notion of control societies anticipates how media companies now use virality machines to penetrate and exploit social processes. Crucially, the locus of power of this control is dividuals, or datafied engagement, rather than individuals (Deleuze, 1992, p. 7). Controlling the flow of datafied engagement does not require the time and resources needed to discipline individuals. As such, dividual control lends media companies unprecedented power to shape social life because it makes it hard for users to know how they are being used and manipulated (Chun, 2008, p. 27). This dividual control has become more pronounced with the advent of data colonialism.

Because dividual control is so hard for users to perceive on an individual basis, it is important for social scientists to unpack how it functions. I thus illustrate how it works with respect to Bumble's thoughtfulness algorithm in this section. In so doing, I suggest the masculine gaze my respondents experienced on Bumble can be attributed, in part, to how this algorithm cultivates thoughtlessness.

Algorithmic thoughtfulness

I have already detailed how Bumble's thoughtfulness algorithm thwarts queer desire in [Chapter 7](#). But in this section, I explore how it works with respect to gender rather than sexuality.

Bumble's former CEO, Wolfe, explains that Bumble developed its thoughtfulness algorithm because it is hard to tell if someone is being thoughtful simply by looking at their profile (Fellizar, 2015). Because most profiles contain little more than a few images, words, and emojis, she claims many users tend to swipe quickly according to gut reactions, often after little more than a quick glance at the first profile

photo. Clearly, it is hard for thoughtfulness to come into play in this context. Wolfe thus claims that Bumble developed its thoughtfulness algorithm to determine which users are being thoughtful. Elaborating on what it takes for users to achieve thoughtful status, she says they must display “good behavior, proactive behavior, and healthy engagement over time” (Fellizar, 2015). After a 152determination of user thoughtfulness is made, Bumble then provides “thoughtful” users more and quicker opportunities to connect with other “thoughtful” users.

Wolfe claims she is not trying to turn everyone into a thoughtful dater through this algorithm. Instead, she contends the thoughtfulness algorithm is simply meant to eliminate unthoughtful users from the stack of profiles that thoughtful users see. In addition, no one is forced to try to become “thoughtful” according to this algorithm. In Deleuze’s terminology, rather than mold individuals through psychic subjugation, discipline, or training, it modulates individuals into a distributed network calibrated for “thoughtfulness.”

Crucially, Wolfe also claims the thoughtfulness algorithm cultivates an interactive environment where women should feel empowered to pursue their relationship goals. It does this by equalling “the playing field so men don’t feel the need to be the aggressive hunter and ... women don’t feel like they have to play the damsel-in-distress” (Fellizar, 2015). The playing field Wolfe is referring to here is elaborated in evolutionary psychology, a subdiscipline that informs many of the views people hold about dating, including the common idea that male desire for casual sex is baked into human DNA.

Because patriarchal power remains hegemonic, many believe the desires evolutionary psychologists claim to be encoded in our DNA lead to problematic social dynamics, including a toxic hookup culture privileging proclivities more often found in men than women. As Wolfe notes, many women feel compelled to play the damsel in distress, whereas many men feel entitled to pursue as many sexual conquests as possible. By using an algorithm ostensibly able to counteract these tendencies, then, Wolfe suggests Bumble is able to cultivate a space where dating dynamics more aligned with today’s mores can flourish, which leaves women in a better position to pursue their relationship goals.

Algorithmic thoughtlessness

Wolfe claims Bumble’s algorithm cultivates thoughtfulness to empower women. But as I have highlighted in this and the previous chapter, my respondents considered engagement on Bumble to be thoughtless at best. This disconnect between Wolfe’s claim about

Bumble's algorithm and user experiences is not unique to Bumble; rather, It is a prominent feature of social media in general, where media companies are free to make any claim they wish about proprietary algorithms they secret away.

It may seem natural to let companies hide their algorithms. But this possibility is very recent. Throughout much of the 20th century, algorithms could not be owned because they were seen as scientific facts or mental processes rather than artificial things (Chun, 2013). This changed in 1994, when the US patent office redefined algorithms as things because they can make material changes to computers, paving the way for algorithms to be owned.

This change to the legal definition of algorithms aligns with a longer shift in the meaning of information that has taken place over the past few centuries (Chun, 2013). Information originally referred to processes whereby human minds were shaped, through knowledge acquisition from study or training, for instance. But information now mostly refers to data that exists independent from human minds.

Bumble's control of "thoughtfulness" shows that information can now shape human minds once again. But in a fundamentally different way than before. Rather than shaping them through study or training, it shapes them via individual control.

With information feeding into users by way of individual control on Bumble, users learn to think and behave in the ways that Bumble deems thoughtful. Indeed, those who do not risk becoming less visible, if not completely invisible, on it .

Bumble's thoughtfulness algorithm exemplifies the drive to penetrate, capture, and measure the hitherto impenetrable within data colonialism. As such, it signals two key shifts in the locus of power as neoliberalism morphes into data colonialism: first, rather than encourage entrepreneurs of themselves to maximize their human capital, it channels individuals into addling vortexes of interactivity to be monetized; and second, rather than cultivate rational subjects via feedback accessible to consciousness, it updates users' body parts with new drives via haptic feedback users become habituated to. These shifts have lent media companies unprecedented power to colonize the incalculable qualities they claim to cultivate as they instrumentalize everyday life with ever-increasing granularity. Given these data colonial developments Bumble is aligned with, it is unsurprising the individual thought control it advances compelled my respondents to conform to the masculine mode of encounter detailed in the previous section.

"Hang the DJ" as the wet dream of data colonialism

As media companies now wield unprecedented power to control thoughts, behaviors, and desires, it is important to unpack how this power is naturalized within the culture of data colonialism. I do so here through a close reading of the *Black Mirror* episode “Hang the DJ.”

This episode is set in the near future, where people can opt into a dating service aptly called “the system.” This service claims to find users an optimal partner by putting them through a series of trial relationships. Once an optimal partner is found, it then requires users to spend the rest of their lives with them.

The episode begins with two new users, Amy and Frank, going on their first date set up by the system. Paired for only 12 hours, they spend a nice, if awkward, night together. They are then paired with a series of other partners they visibly disdain for years on end.

Near the end of the episode, the system informs Amy and Frank that they can share a final meal with a previous partner of their choice before it will give them their “optimal” match. Unsurprisingly, they choose each other for this final meal. While eating, they decide to run away together, trusting their own intuition over whatever the system has in store for them. As they reach the edge of town, the scene dissolves into digital detritus and fades to black.

A graphic then emerges to reveal that Amy and Frank have rebelled against the system 998 out of 1000 times. As the camera pans up, we then see Amy and Frank looking up from their respective phones, each showing “99.8 % match” superimposed over photos of each other in typical dating app fashion. Scanning the crowded bar, they soon spot each other as the song “Panic” gets louder in the background.

The chorus to Panic, “hang the DJ, hang the DJ, hang the DJ,” lends this episode its title. And the song itself resonates with one of its themes. Its lyrics depict a disconnect between the information media companies feed people and the things that really matter. “There’s panic on the streets,” Morrissey sings, but “the music they constantly play, it says nothing to me about my life.”

Marr and Morrissey of the Smiths wrote Panic after a DJ they were listening to cut straight from a news report about Chernobyl to an upbeat pop song. It is thus a call to resist a system stimulating people with happy content as the world crumbles around them. Yet in the context of the episode, it functions less as a wake-up call than an upbeat pop song Amy and Frank hear as they blissfully cede a key moment in the formation of their relationship to the system.

By ending the episode with this call to rebel against a system that ignores the things that matter just as the protagonists acquiesce to the systems’ demands, “Hang the DJ” suggests the mediasphere is able to incorporate resistance to it. Yet this point could easily be lost on

casual viewers streaming the episode on Netflix. In a casual viewing, it could easily be read more like an enticing ad for the wet dream of data colonialism.

The wet dream of data colonialism, as I noted in the introduction, is the fantasy that AI is on the verge of circumventing consciousness as the last remaining roadblock to finally giving us what we truly desire before we even know we want it. This fantasy encourages us to sleep soundly while more and more aspects of our intimate lives are controlled by media companies with unprecedented granularity. As “Hang the DJ” imagines a future where machines have developed the capacity to simulate what it feels like to fall so madly in love that a couple would fight the system to stay together, it encourages us to embrace the kind of future dating apps want us to believe in, one where we place our trust in them as they penetrate hitherto impenetrable depths of desire and instrumentalize it for profits.

An online dating patent has already staked a claim on much of this wet dream, describing an invention for making optimal recommendations by creating “true profiles” extracted from unselfconscious engagement surreptitiously datafied and mined using AI (DiRienzo, 2024). Many dating apps are also incorporating various aspects of this dream into their designs. AI Match Maker gets to know users by interrupting them as they go about their day, taking candid photos, videos, and audio recordings at will to uncover “authentic” proclivities (aimm, 2019). Snacks gets users to habitually confide in personal AI avatars that then chat with other AI avatars to make recommendations (“Snack,” 2021). And generative AI has already been incorporated into the most popular dating apps, writing answers to profile prompts and suggesting messages to send to matches (Silberling, 2023).

These dating app companies claim the AI they use is helping their users forge intimate connections. But as I have shown throughout this book, AI used by dating apps rarely works as advertised. Far from being used to uncover hitherto impenetrable depths of desire, it has been used to leverage superficial indices of attraction into a swipe drive disenfranchising POC, inconsiderate behaviors into thoughtless 155interactive spaces inimical to the desires of most women, and scalable desires into fungible encounters misaligned with sexual minorities. By imagining an AI system able to simulate love authentically in the near future, then, “Hang the DJ” distracts us from the way AI is currently dispossessing daters of their desires while possessing them with ghosts of coloniality haunting themselves.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I followed the trajectory my respondents made through the dating platform ecology. Doing so allowed me to situate their uptake of dating apps within the transition to opaque AI in the online dating industry. This opacity is often characterized as a black box in media studies. And from the perspective of users, this characterization is apt. Black boxing recommender systems within the online dating industry made it easier for dating apps to conduct whatever AI experiments they wanted on their users because they could no longer see how they were being used.

These dating app experiments led my respondents to habitually upgrade to newer apps, hoping to avoid obsessive repetitions induced by older ones or to find quality dates by staying at the bleeding edge of AI. While these upgrades rarely led to much improvement, they habituated my respondents to habitual change. This, in turn, readied them to be inserted into whatever interactive spaces dating apps happened to devise, even ones that were clearly misalignments with their interests. In fact, these environments seemed to select for, and thus incentivize, a masculine mode of interaction encouraging women to go with the flow while dating and to expect aloofness from the guys they met and had sex with. This corroborates Illouz's depiction of dating apps as turning female sex organs into cheap commodities for desirable men to accumulate and the masculine-controlled visual industries to profit from (2019).

Yet the women in my sample did not embrace the emotionally detached mode of dating that Illouz suggests they do. Instead, they were frustrated that they felt compelled to come off as less serious about finding a substantial relationship than they were. Their frustration reveals a vast disconnect between users' experiences of Bumble and the claims Wolfe has made about it. Indeed, rather than immersing themselves in a thoughtful environment emboldening them to pursue their relationship goals there, many of the women in my sample felt compelled to perform for a masculine gaze largely uncondusive to their goals if they wanted to find a date on it.

The doublespeak advanced by media companies like Bumble is able to flourish today because laws allow them to conduct surreptitious AI experiments on users while revealing little about what they are doing. This opacity allows these companies to claim their algorithms objectively measure any quality they wish. But the dictates of data colonialism require them to mine user data for the most lucrative patterns to automate. Far from merely functioning as a black box preventing users from seeing how they are being used, then, these apps act like one-way funhouse mirrors, secretly observing their users' every move while showing them a distorted picture of the world compelling them to move in ways that are often misaligned with their

own interests.

Given this power media companies now have to instrumentalize desire however they see fit, it makes sense that cultural artifacts encourage us to imagine something like “the system” in “Hang the DJ” is just around the corner. Advancing the wet dream of data colonialism that our deepest desires will come true if we simply trust AI to know us better than we know ourselves, it illustrates how the culture of data colonialism now greases the wheels of media companies as they update our body parts with new drives to serve data colonialism.

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11 Conclusion

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In this book, I have shown how *virality machines* are recalibrating desire by coupling users with a *distributed unconscious* undergirding AI. This distributed unconscious is hard to see. But by exposing *uncanny ghosts* unleashed by it, I sought to jolt us out of the cynical detachment data colonialism now relies on to function. I also uncovered *hopeful ghosts* from the recent past to begin envisioning what better alternatives to today's dating apps might look like. I conclude this book here by reiterating the importance of these conceptual tools for combating data colonialism.

Virality machines

To unpack how we have become ghosts of coloniality haunting ourselves, I focused on the unprecedented control virality machines (touchscreen phones) afford media companies. I argued these machines lend media companies unprecedented control over everyday life as it is channeled through the apps they own. In particular, I focused on the material affordances of these machines, such as sensors allowing for incessant data capture, haptic interfaces allowing for addicting protocols, and push notifications allowing for immediate, embodied feedback. These affordances allow social media apps to spread novel behaviors at an unprecedented rate as they exploit the social life they penetrate. On dating apps, this can be seen in the way they rapidly spread a drive to swipe, on the one hand, and how they use penetrating AI experiments to mine datafied desire from this drive for lucrative ways to orchestrate encounters via embodied feedback.

My respondents did not know precisely how this feedback was calibrated. But the novel interactive environments devised through these experiments compelled them to habitually upgrade to newer apps, either hoping to avoid obsessive repetitions induced by older apps or to optimize their dates by staying at the bleeding edge of technological change. These upgrades did not lead to the improvements my respondents hoped for. But they rendered their body parts, from thumbs to sex organs, susceptible to habitual updates.

In detailing these updates, I situated them within a viral process of

digital disruption whereby dating apps work to penetrate dating dynamics and recalibrate them for profits within the networks they control. This viral process led to rapid shifts in the way my respondents dated, acting like entrepreneurs of intimacy on 159OkCupid, swiping addicts on Tinder, and bored ghosts on Bumble. These shifts in behavior suggest dating apps now have unprecedented power to exploit the dating dynamics they disrupt as the desire for sexual intimacy is increasingly channeled through virality machines.

The distributed unconscious

As online daters turned to virality machines instead of PCs to find dates throughout the 2010s, a distributed unconscious emerged to govern their encounters. To unpack how this distributed unconscious works, I focused on how my respondents connections were controlled by AI algorithms ostensibly able to determine user attractiveness and thoughtfulness on Tinder and Bumble, respectively.

These apps contend their algorithms can rank attractiveness and thoughtfulness objectively in order to make optimal recommendations. But I argued they do something far different: privilege heteronormative, racist, and sexist modes of desire. I made this argument by showing how their algorithms advance four problematic dynamics, selecting for a rapid mode of interactivity misaligned with the proclivities of sexual minorities, amplifying stereotypical expressions of attraction devaluing POC, cultivating thoughtless environments making suitable dates especially hard for women to find, and privileging a masculine mode of expression compelling women to come off as less serious about dating than they were.

To flesh out these dynamics, I triangulated between interviews, official statements made by dating apps about their algorithms, and Reddit forums where tech-savvy users discuss these algorithms. This allowed me to unpack how these apps cultivate thoughtless interactive environments inimical to most users and incentivize behaviors users largely feel are inconsiderate and counterproductive.

These dynamics were largely imperceptible to my respondents. Yet they nevertheless emerged, in part, from their own desires – albeit dispossessed and recalibrated. I thus suggested the way they felt driven to move in these inconsiderate and counterproductive ways was the result of a distributed unconscious undergirding the AI used by these apps. I then extrapolated out from this dynamic to broader processes within social media to suggest that the updated drives animating my respondents' body parts are part of a vast distributed unconscious now compelling social media users to move in ways that

are misaligned with their conscious wishes.

Uncanny ghosts disrupting our cynical slumber

After my respondents had spent a few weeks immersed in the thoughtless interactive spaces dating apps cultivate, many had come to expect inconsiderate treatment from their matches and to reciprocate in kind. This led them to cynically engage dating apps as a coping mechanism to mentally detach from these environments they were frustrated with yet saw no way to avoid.¹⁶⁰

The cynical way my respondents engaged dating apps does not seem to be unique to my respondents; rather, it seems endemic to data colonialism itself, induced by the common view that algorithmic exploitation is inevitable within it (Dencik & Cable, 2017; Draper & Turow, 2019). I thus argued that many of our go-to tools for critiquing social problems are in need of an update. These tools – from false consciousness to consciousness raising – were designed for a world where knowledge of exploitation went hand-in-hand with its mitigation. But as knowledge of exploitation now feeds into the cynicism data colonialism thrives on, continuing to merely detail it is more likely bolster than disrupt it. Along with detailing this exploitation, then, I proposed it is also important to develop approaches designed to evoke abhorrence at its barbarism.

This book has been my attempt to do just that. I did this, in large part, by fleshing out ghosts unleashed by the distributed unconscious via the visceral register of the Freudian uncanny (2003). I found the Freudian uncanny particularly useful for this task because it evokes fear as repressed modes of thought threaten to return to consciousness. This imminent return troubles the collective fantasies we like to believe about ourselves as being progressive. As such, it compels us to turn away from the unconscious from whence it threatens to arise. The uncanny thus acts as a kind of evocative force field protecting commonplace fantasies while cultivating ignorance of an abhorrent past that remains alive within us because it was never adequately redressed. By encouraging us to ignore this past, then, the uncanny protects powerful individuals, institutions, and systems predicated on widespread ignorance of the unjust way they came to power.

Rather than turn away from the uncanny in this book, then, I followed its visceral pull back to the collectively disavowed modes of thought that the distributed unconscious both amplifies and conceals. I did this, in part, by situating my interviews and algorithmic analyses within the cultural unconscious of data colonialism through close readings of science fiction. In these readings, I suggested the android

revolt in *Westworld* obfuscates the coloniality AI automates, while the femme fatal fembot in *Ex Machina* represses the queer potential of AI. Through these readings, I also uncovered common tropes and stereotypes within today's cultural unconscious stemming from coloniality that, precisely because they are rarely reflected upon consciously, constitute much of the realm of possibility for how we tend to think and feel about AI.

Along with these readings of the cultural unconscious, I also provided an allegorical reading of *Us*. In it, I suggested its debased doppelgangers killing off their originals is a fitting figure for the digital profiles media companies create from our disavowed desires to govern our encounters. I thus proposed this movie aptly illustrates how the repressed is coming back to haunt us: not as a revolt of identities long oppressed by coloniality à la *Westworld*, but as the return of reprehensible proclivities within us all as the distributed unconscious takes control.

As I situated my findings within the broader culture of data colonialism in this way, I argued that the distributed unconscious is further removed from conscious awareness than the cultural unconscious. This is because the latter works through symbolic violence embedded in language and popular culture designed for conscious consumption. But the former works through epistemic violence largely imperceptible to individuals as AI circumvents consciousness through the tactile interfaces and haptic feedback fed into users via virality machines.

As this distributed unconscious leverages AI predictions into self-fulfilling prophecies, it provides users it deems valuable more opportunities to become valued. In this way, it actualizes a promising future for media companies at the expense of all but the most privileged users. And it does so in a way that is largely unknowable to anyone. For this reason, I argued the coloniality advanced by the distributed unconscious is even harder to unpack than it was during previous modes of colonization and is threatening to lock us into desire rooted in coloniality for the foreseeable future.

Given these dire stakes data colonialism has laid upon our future desires, it is high time we hone our capacity to grasp the uncanny ghosts we are becoming with. Doing so could help jolt us out of the cynical slumber data colonialism relies on as it penetrates ever deeper into the interstices of everyday life.

Decolonizing desire via hopeful ghosts

Yet even if we do manage to wake up from this cynical slumber, this will not be enough to decolonize desire if better alternatives to today's

popular dating apps remain all but unimaginable. I thus also invoked two hopeful ghosts in the book. These ghosts stem from a time before data colonialism had made it hard to believe algorithms could be aligned with humane values. They thus helped me begin to imagine what better alternatives to these dating apps might look like.

By invoking the ghost of OkCupid's recent past, for instance, I recalled algorithmic features online daters valued when they primarily sought dates through PCs rather than virality machines. And by channeling Turing's ghost, I uncovered queer potential haunting AI from the margins. With these ghosts in mind, I then suggested my sexual minority respondents seemed attuned to them as they tried to find dates in an ethical manner. Unfortunately, it was hard for them to do this on dating apps, largely because their business models are predicated on creating lots of fungible connections to monetize.

Given the difficulty my sexual minority respondents had trying to engage dating apps ethically, I found it important to highlight how one of them, Diana, recalled creating a safe space for sex on OkCupid's website. She did this by answering match questions according to her keen understanding of the way women's bodies have been oppressed by coloniality. Adjusting the parameters of OkCupid's original recommender system in this way gave her confidence she would not have to deal with assholes and would be likely to encounter others worthy of entanglement.

Diana's practice of creating a safe space for sex on OkCupid was unique among my respondents. It would thus be ignored as an outlier within most social science methods. But this atypicality is precisely why it is important to highlight today. As dominant patterns indebted to the past are now being amplified by AI selecting for and incentivizing modes of desire rooted in coloniality, recalling practices like Diana's that have recently been marginalized by data colonialism can help us envision concrete ways to decolonize online dating in the near future. I thus argued she beckons, along with our hopeful ghosts, towards a world where machines cultivate safe spaces for idiosyncratic desires to flourish, no matter how unscalable, queer, or misaligned by the powers that be.

Conclusion

It may be tempting to see the ghosts in this book as the product of an over-active imagination, a melding of gothic horror and science fiction closer to speculative fiction than staid social science. But this is how my respondents spoke of dating apps. Through their experiences, I sought to jolt us out of our cynical slumber by conveying the appalling stakes of the world we now inhabit, one where our bodies are

incessantly pulled out of joint and updated with novel yet uncannily familiar drives.

This jolt is especially needed for privileged users. As Fanon noted 70 years ago, those who are privileged by coloniality are the ones that must first of all wake up if colonialism is to be eradicated (1963). By contrast, those oppressed by these uncanny ghosts – POC, women, and sexual minorities – already feel their presence intuitively.

Yet it is worth noting that the oppression caused by these dating app ghosts affected all but the most privileged of respondents, a select few who were White, masculine, young, wealthy, attractive, successful, and well-educated. Moreover, even relatively marginalized respondents were worked into these ghosts. They contributed to the racist swipe drive. And they fed into the angst-inducing boredom of Bumble. This is why I have insisted throughout this book that we must situate the symbolic and interpersonal violence advanced by dating apps within the epistemic violence of their algorithms. These algorithms now perpetuate a long history of coloniality as media companies arrogate intelligence itself to AI given free rein to summarily orchestrate encounters. This arrogation is a key feature of the wet dream of data colonialism. Promising to give us what we truly desire before we even know we want it by circumventing consciousness, this dominant techno-utopian fantasy distracts us from the distributed unconscious media companies now set in motion to govern our encounters.

Given this epistemic violence undergirding data colonialism, any attempt to combat its injustice must begin with solidarity. This is why I have found it important to extrapolate out from dating apps to social media so frequently in this book. Doing so allowed me to suggest that my respondents are not unique, that we are all becoming ghosts in the virality machines now lending media companies unprecedented power to control our social lives – all the way down to a distributed unconscious undergirding AI and all the way up to collective modes of thought calibrated to maximize profits.

Far from the world imagined in “Hang the DJ,” then, where machines have evolved to uncover our deepest desires and optimize the search for love, our world is more like *Us*, where debased doppelgangers have emerged from a shadowy lab below a funhouse hall of social media mirrors to rule the world. These mirrors allow media companies to conduct surreptitious experiments on our dispossessed 163 desires, devise digital doppelgangers from those we disavow, and compel us to act in ways that are lucrative precisely because they are misaligned with those we consciously espouse.

Yet this horrific funhouse mirror world is not inevitable. By attending to our ghosts through the approach developed in this book,

we can yet galvanize the collective will to combat data colonialism and begin to create the kind of world we should all aspire to live in, one replete with authentic love.

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Appendix

Methods

Because algorithms are proprietary, it is hard to do research on them using traditional scientific methods. It has thus been recommended that critical algorithm scholars use a combination of methods “to compensate for the drawbacks of employing them in isolation” (Kitchin, 2017, p. 22). I thus use interviews and a content analysis of Reddit forums in this book. Although many of my respondents had used both dating sites and apps, Reddit forums allowed me to gain a longitudinal perspective of the date-o-sphere, with posts and comments analyzed from 2010 to 2020. This was a period when perspectives of algorithmic media became more pessimistic (Dencik & Cable, 2017; Draper & Turow, 2019; Zuboff, 2019).

Interviews

The interviews analyzed for this study were taken in 2017–2018. Forty-eight respondents were found using snowball sampling, starting with my own network of friends on Facebook and in real life. I invited anyone who had used a dating platform in the past to participate.

The most common platforms used by my respondents were Bumble, Tinder, and OkCupid. The average age of the sample was 32 years. Three of my respondents were students, 41 were working in NYC, and four were unemployed. While I tried to find an even split of men/women, white/non-white, and straight/non-straight respondents, this was not possible because of time constraints. There were 18 men, 30 women, 29 white, 19 non-white, 27 straight, and 11 non-straight users in my sample. Five respondents were working in the online-dating industry: analyzing data, consulting app creators, coaching daters, making a documentary about online dating, and marketing a dating website. The respondents were diverse in terms of their nationalities, being originally from Spain, India, England, Australia, Peru, Sweden, China, and Japan.

The interviews were conducted after respondents signed the consent form. They took place in bars and coffee shops in New York City at my respondents' convenience, and I was unable to provide them with compensation for their time. The interviews were open-ended to allow respondents to expand on their unique experiences. I asked about: (1) the differences they found between dates they had encountered through dating platforms and those they had found through other means; (2) the differences they found between the various platforms they had used; (3) the 166 memorable dates and relationships they had found through dating platforms; (4) the changes they would like to see made to dating platforms; and (5) how they felt about the algorithmic recommender systems and filtering mechanisms of the apps and sites they had used.

Media go-along

About two-thirds of my respondents agreed to participate in a mediated portion of my interview protocol. In this part of the interview, I asked respondents to use the dating app they had recently been using the most as I looked on and asked questions. This procedure followed the "media go-along" method, where the researcher questions respondents as they navigate the app in question (Jørgensen, 2016). This is especially useful for studying phone apps because it allows respondents to lead the researchers to emotionally charged places they may not otherwise have recalled (Jørgensen, 2016).

During this part of the interview, I asked respondents to go through their profiles with me. While they navigated their profiles, I asked them how they felt about the pictures they had put up and what they were thinking about while writing their "bios." A bio is a small area for text under one's profile photo. After going over their profiles, I had my respondents swipe on 15 to 30 profiles while they explained why they were swiping left or right. Swiping right is how you indicate you like someone on all the apps my respondents used for this part of the interview: OkCupid, Tinder, and Bumble. Nine of my respondents also read or let me read aloud some of the messages they had sent or received.

The interviews took an average of 56 minutes. The longest was 2 hours and 18 minutes, and the shortest was 22 minutes. After recording and transcribing each interview, I changed all identifying information to protect the privacy of my respondents. I then coded them for recurring experiences and grouped these codes into broader themes using thematic analysis and Atlas.TI (Guest et al., 2012).

I chose to use critical discourse analysis to code and find themes in

my data, as this is useful for uncovering power structures within society. I was particularly interested in how affordances of dating apps were shifting power dynamics in terms of gender, race, sexuality, class, and the relationship between the user and the platform in terms of data exploitation. Only a few of my respondents were familiar with the algorithmic system of dating websites or apps. This is unsurprising and consistent with other research on dating platforms (Sharabi, 2020; Tong et al., 2016). While the themes I uncovered through my respondents implied an effect of algorithms on them, I decided to analyze Reddit forums to uncover more details about users' perceptions of the algorithms governing their connections.

Content analysis of OkCupid and Tinder subreddit forums

I supplemented my interviews with Reddit forums because Redditors are technologically savvy (Sattelberg, 2019). They thus allowed me to uncover a more detailed delineation of algorithmic imaginaries. Reddit users also skew White, young, and male compared to the US population (Clement, 2020; Sattelberg, 2019). The semi-anonymity of Reddit also allows users to express how they feel about politically volatile topics (Lee, 2019). However, Reddit's upvoting and karma system can amplify dominant viewpoints (Massanari, 2017). This is especially concerning because some subreddits foster problematic social perceptions, such as sexism (Ging, 2017; Lee, 2019; Massanari, 2017).

For reasons discussed in the "media archaeology" section, I analyzed the subreddits of OkCupid and Tinder. These, along with Bumble, were the apps my respondents were using the most. Tinder and Bumble were by far the most popular dating apps used in 2019 in the United States (Clement, 2019). I analyzed Bumble's subreddit as well, but because the themes discovered were nearly identical to those found on Tinder's subreddit, I focused on perceptions of OkCupid's and Tinder's algorithms as prototypical platforms designed for different material hardware in this book.

To home in on the most prominent themes discussed in these forums pertaining to algorithms, I searched for "algorithm" and sorted by the "top" posts of "all time" on January 29, 2021. To be clear, these were the posts with the most upvotes after subtracting for downvotes from the entire history of these subreddits, not only the posts created on January 29, 2021. I chose this "top" filter because I wanted to avoid privileging new posts, which happens in the other sorting mechanisms Reddit offers. These other sorting mechanisms are useful for being part of the discussion. But this was not my goal.

Instead of being part of the discussion, I wanted to analyze posts and discussions that had garnered the most attention in the past. For this reason, I read posts starting from the most popular until I reached thematic saturation, when no new themes were discovered in three posts and discussions in a row. While this did not produce the richness of an ethnography, it allowed for longitudinal insights. It also ensured that I would not miss a discussion that garnered a lot of attention, which can only be discerned after the fact. In other words, while an ethnography allows one to experience a living discussion, my process allowed me to focus on the parts of that discussion that had been particularly prominent in the past.

Because this book is focused on how users perceive algorithmic recommender systems, I omitted posts about a “best message” algorithm and an “attractiveness scale” algorithm OkCupid has used, which are not part of its recommender system. After excluding these posts, my sample included 25 posts and their comments from OkCupid’s subreddit and 14 posts and their comments from Tinder’s subreddit, spanning from 2011 to 2020.

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